# MRS. MEYNELL
AND HER
# LITERARY GENERATION

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ANNE KIMBALL TUELL

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By

ANNE KIMBALL TUELL

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New York
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE

20172

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*To the memory of*

ALICE MEYNELL

# PREFACE

THIS book is offered primarily as a critical study of the work in prose and verse of Alice Christiana Meynell. It is founded on her complete literary product, only a moderate fraction of which has been reprinted. Illustrations are chosen by preference from material not recovered and therefore not generally available.

The project was in no sense inspired by the family of Mrs. Meynell. The author indeed conceived her plan in Mrs. Meynell's lifetime, and secured consent to her work perhaps only because a stranger, of another country and another creed, could make no invasion upon personal privacies. She worked, however, with Mrs. Meynell's assistance and approval, and received the greater privilege of her acquaintance and hospitality. Mrs. Meynell took most courteous pains that information on her work be complete, and gave access for the purpose to files of prints, press notices, and correspondence.

The author wishes to thank the editors of the *Atlantic Monthly,* the *Sewanee Review,* and the *Catholic World* for permission to reproduce her criticism previously presented in other forms in those periodicals. Acknowledgments are made besides of permission to quote from copyright mate-

rial: to Mr. Wilfrid Meynell; to Charles Scribner's Sons Company, the American publishers of Mrs. Meynell's collected *Essays* and *Poems* and of *Hearts of Controversy;* to the Oxford University Press for the use of Mrs. Meynell's *Second Person Singular;* to Blackie & Son for excerpts from Mrs. Meynell's prefaces to the Red Letter Series of the English poets; to William Blackwood & Sons, and to Dodd, Mead & Company, for passages from Mrs. Meynell's *John Ruskin,* to the Medici Society for sentences from *Mary the Mother of Jesus;* to G. Bell & Son for quotations from the volumes of Coventry Patmore, *Principles in Art* and *Poems;* to Elkin Matthews for brief quotations from the *Poems* of Lionel Johnson and from Mrs. Meynell's introduction to the *Poems* of Gordon Hake; to Chapman & Hall for a cutting from Mrs. Meynell's introduction to Adeline Cashmore's *Mount of Vision;* to Mr. W. M. Meredith for passages from the *Letters of George Meredith to Alice Meynell;* and for minor quotations to J. M. Dent & Sons, B. T. Batsford, John Lane the Bodley Head, Chatto & Windus, William Heinemann, Constable & Company, Houghton Mifflin Company, the Macmillan Company, Alfred A. Knopf.

The author is grateful besides to friends not mentioned here who have assisted in collection and presentation of material. Special thanks are due: for the honour of the introduction to Mrs. Meynell, to Mr. Ellery Sedgwick; for critical reading of the

manuscript, to Professor A. H. Thorndike, Professor J. B. Fletcher, Miss Vida Dutton Scudder, Miss Katharine Lee Bates; for valuable bibliographical assistance, to Mr. Wilfrid Meynell, Mr. Sebastian Meynell, and Mr. Frederick Page. Her deepest debt the author acknowledges to the memory of Mrs. Meynell.

A. K. T.

Wellesley College,
*October 28, 1924.*

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# MRS. MEYNELL AND HER LITERARY GENERATION

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## CHAPTER I

### Introductory

Mrs. Meynell's prose and poetry have both received from criticism a respect seldom accorded to so scanty a collected product. The body of her prose which she has cared to preserve is contained in three small volumes. The edition of her complete poems is only one slender sheaf. Between the heyday of her fame in the early nineties and the notable paean at her death from poet-critics who knew how to praise nobly, there were years of quieter recognition. But through fluctuations of taste a common consent has persisted: here in the slim volumes of Mrs. Meynell is prose of quality, and poetry which needs no commentary to be known for poetry. Criticism has seldom seriously denied to her a fine and private value.

Distinction was the word set apart for her work in 1890 by Coventry Patmore in his essay on that title in which he made Mrs. Meynell not so much the illustration as the thing itself. And while later studies have relinquished the superlatives of Patmore, every analysis must strive to name more closely certain superiorities which are at the heart

of his meaning. Panegyrists have rung the changes on "exquisite," "delicate," "subtle." There are no synonyms left for the late comer. It is safer to take from Mrs. Meynell herself phraseology at once more temperate and more precise—and to find in her work at its best a union of what she was wont to call in others "solitude" and "vigilance." The words suggest the distinction besides of her unforgettable presence.

Solitude seems at first thought remote indeed from that lovely centre of her company. Friends of later years will remember Mrs. Meynell in her country home, the cottage set low in the Sussex lanes. There is solitude without. Beyond and afar rises the line of level downs, barrier of the lonely valley, solemn under the shift of hovering cloud-shadow. Behind is the woodland path, dark with the gleam of the strong holly trees; and about are the brakes of the common, still and quiet in their long spaces under the busy Sussex sky. But at the neighbourhood of the little house the sombre brakes turn to acres of wheat varying in sun and shade, touched here and there by the gleam of truant poppy. And within are the old walls set with bright flowers, and the old house, centre of a patriarchal settlement, its garden door always open to welcomed guests, to troops of children, and the little dogs and all.

For Mrs. Meynell, who wrote more than once to deplore the separation of families after marriage of the children, passed the best of these later days in

her quiet country, with many children about her, their neighbour cottages at hand, their care continually watching, till Greatham became, even with the frail health of its mistress, a hearth of good-fellowship.

Here in the library, centre of all cheer, she found strength to appear at least a little of each day. In later times her figure did not seem the bent flower of the Sargent portrait, but stood taut and firm, resolute with the courage of conscious weakness. Her memorable eyes, dark and sorrowful in repose, were ready to kindle at the first demand for kindness. Her voice, troubled now and then with the bafflement of feebleness, rose always gently above her company, resonant, rich in quality, hastened to laughing insistence in defence of thought or phrase. The mind, worn too often by the restless nights suggested in her late lines to the "dear fool Sleep," moved always with control, quickening at need for concentrated thought or with wit to put a visitor at ease. She lived, ready for what the day should send—whether the cherished leisure for a new poem, day-long attendance upon a cricket match in the duty of neighbourliness, or a visit from a troop of children dropped in to afternoon tea. To see her was to recall the admonitions of her essays, her commendations for "the courteous game of pretending to be amused," her call for the immediate business of all souls "to live in loveliness and pleasantness with one another." The last quotation is from her once noted ironical essay upon the Carlyle letters,

entitled "Lovely and Pleasant in their Lives." For Mrs. Meynell herself one can remember the phrase in reverence.

But the presence, graciously a member of its company, seemed in some elusive way graciously withdrawn. Hers was a guardian spirit, aware of its time and place, mindful of its neighbour's ease, candid, kindling to sympathy, but dwelling the while, as one knew, in a superior place apart. "Her ladyhood" moved among its inferiors as one that served, yet kept its state.

And for her thought the loneliness of the human spirit was at once its mysterious doom and its august privilege. Always she respected the isolation of our separated selves, parted in a cleavage resisted in vain by mortal wistfulness. "Sealed, fenced, and inviolate gardens" are "the consciences of men."

Solitude she felt to be a special human endowment, the acceptance of it the likely sign of genius large or small. "The near companionship of two solitudes" is her high praise for the generous revelation of the Browning letters. "Surely he is not solitary. We should not wish him to be as solitary as a poet"—such is her final limitation on the genius of Dickens.

"Yes, I have kept things pretty much to myself as regards my generation," Mrs. Meynell said gently of late, perhaps in mild rebuke at too eager an effort to establish for her the customary affilia-

tions. And the student of her mind knows the reference to have been, not to her reticences, which were honourable but never niggardly, but rather to the sheltered preserve in which she kept her gift. She meant no fastidious withdrawal from common contacts; that she would have called evasion of man's debt to man. She meant no avoidance of choice on matters which concern that debt. On fundamental problems she risked always her decision. She knew what she thought and why. She was Catholic for cause definite and stated: "My reason for joining the Church is my reason for remaining in it—its administration of morals. Other Christian churches or sects (I except the Orthodox Greek and Russian) have the legislation of Christian morality but they do not enforce the law. The Catholic Church administers it by means of her Sacraments, that of the Confessional especially." She was Socialist, with tense aversion to what she felt to be the impracticalities of the Communistic experiment. She was Feminist in lawful and dignified ways. "I marched and marched and marched," she used to say. She took her definite and unshaken positions, friendly and accessible in the world of men. But her art was, like her conscience, a "sealed, fenced, and inviolate garden."

In a sense which few would risk, she kept herself unspotted from her world. By reversal of the parable, we might say that her talent did its obedient service by being wrapped in a napkin. It has fore-

gone thereby various gains from interest and exchange. It may be the less representative of contemporary seething. We shall not go to these pages to study the obsolete experiments of the nineties or the obsolescent experiments of the nineteen hundreds. But their quality has remained incorrupt, touched by few of the multitudinous reflections which confuse the literary light of our day. Literary solitude, is, however, in her sense of the word, not isolation, not withdrawal. Least of all is it remoteness of perception.

Hers is the "vigilance" which she loved to praise and detect in another. "The poet," says Wordsworth, "is he who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him." The man of letters, Mrs. Meynell would say for prose and poetry, is he who is most finely aware of the life around and within. Her characteristic temper, therefore, is a watchfulness quiet but vibrant to sense and spirit. Hers was an experience exceptionally rich, and she passed it beyond our common wont awake. Each work of prose or verse was record of acute perception.

To see and perceive she was taught by an exceptional inheritance and an exceptional education—culture fit to liberate a spirit of power to a special birth in beauty. Her parents had for her endowment rare and contrary gifts.

From her mother came abundance. The beautiful Miss Weller was a pianist of note, able to compete

with professionals, who taught her children the habits of musical understanding. She was a painter of talent, whose water-colors could attract the attention of Ruskin. She was above all a person of charm delightfully recorded by the captivated Dickens, whose little verses in honour of this best incarnation of the name of Weller, were always treasured by Mrs. Meynell.

From her father, Thomas James Thompson, came to Mrs. Meynell, without doubt, her frugalities of taste. He was educated in the traditional moulds, privately and at Cambridge, but was a man who did his own thinking. He was man among men, valued as friend and liberal. He was connoisseur, gifted by habits of exceptional culture with a rightness and assurance of taste for letters and for art which his daughter came to feel the only safe criterion. His was a spirit of extraordinary sensitiveness, with extraordinary capacities for interior anguish. But always there were the compensating powers, the joys of appreciation unknown to common ken, imparted to the unusual children whose education he made his life work. He was, and this is perhaps his most important influence upon his youngest daughter, a genius who kept silence, who held back with extraordinary scruple from the risks and compromises of utterance. A finer heritage of taste one could not devise for poet or critic.

Mrs. Meynell has written of her father the perfect memorial in "A Remembrance," a just acknowl-

edgment of her most exquisite derivation: "The delicate, the abstinent, the reticent graces were his in heroic degree. . . . It was by holding session among so many implicit safeguards that he taught, rather than by precepts. Few were these in his speech, but his personality made laws for me. It was a subtle education, for it persuaded insensibly to a conception of my own. How, if he would not define, could I know what things were and what were not worthy of his gentle and implacable judgment? I must needs judge them for myself, yet he constrained me in the judgment. Within that restraint and under that stimulus, which seemed to touch the ultimate springs of thought before they sprang, I began to discern all things in literature and life—that I was bound to love. Not the things of one character only, but excellent things of every character."

Under such compulsion Alice Thompson grew up. She knew the poets, for the father read his daughters poetry. She knew the classics of English prose, for she read all under his guidance. Trained by competent masters to facility and excellence in many languages and accomplishments, she took from her father the temper and authority of high taste.

Mrs. Meynell has called herself an "international child." To her childhood, indeed, came the delights of travel with a felicity which recalls the journeys of "little John Ruskin," but with a freedom of which that disciplined boy can never have dreamed.

Alice Thompson was born in Barnes, west of London, and knew in her memory a child's England, whether for dislike of the Putney suburbs or for buoyant pleasure of the Surrey skies. She was often in early days in French Switzerland and there learned that the true name of an orchard is *"le verger,"* "the word possessing a young child's sight of trees under the sun and moon, a young child's touch of the grass." But most frequent were the returns to Italy to which the home of a married half-sister was to make perpetual recall—most dearly to Genoa, which had always in Mrs. Meynell's memory the superior skies, the closer homeliness. Her unreprinted sketches are full of vagrant memories of the sunny Italian days, of a sunny Italian childhood. She may but recall the relish of inspired Italian cooking, the *frittura,* "delicately dry, golden, a kind of nimble dish." There is evident comprehension for the simple Italian folk, their imperturbable gentleness except for the due outburst. There is familiar knowledge of the Tuscan peasant, his ceremonious manners, his silences. There are bits of simple Italian beauty, like her study of the Italian eye—"set, as it were, at leisure in an ample width." There are the delightful recollections of "A Palace in a Garden," homely below stairs, with "the mixed superiority and intimacy of an Italian kitchen, with its fowls fenced in under the table for the better convenience of killing," with the majestic scene below, the promontory and the bay beyond the

stairs and the lemon trees, and the busy lady of the castle ever at her needle with her back to the view. One traces with some distinctness the adventures of "an English family fond of Italy and capriciously inclined to spend now a winter, now a summer, as longing took them, at Genoa or somewhere to the eastward." There are recorded, as in "Agostino," the confusions dear to childhood, "the brown porters, the apple-women screaming, the ships and chaos of the port," and waiting always miraculously ready "the sea-swept rocks where a certain old palazzo stands in its cypresses and ilex." There is Agostino, the faithful cook whom Lady Butler too has remembered, always apprised of their coming, waiting on the pier, eager to kiss their hands, faithful with the genius of a good servant. "He never tired, but the fire of his heart was kindled by a dinner-party." There is the tale of the "Maid-servants," of maids always governed by affection, who never left and were never dismissed, whose names were "sweet symphonies," Ligia, Rosina, and wide-eyed Majolica. And always we follow in fancy the "curious, friendly children, seeing far more of servants' ways than their parents knew, who never saw any secret or discreditable thing." "These two little girls, very proud of their intimacy in Genoese affairs, and talking the strongest kind of Genoese even to each other in their games, never betrayed the garlic, and there was nothing worse than garlic to conceal."

And deeper than all and above all are the memories of the Italian scene, known and loved from the terrace of the "certain old palazzo." Mrs. Meynell has written in her preface to *A Book of Sun Dial Mottoes:* "The garden of my childhood faced a blue sea, across olives and oleanders, and it bore an inscription which, translated, threatened the generation: 'Thou seest the hour and knowest not the hour.' . . . There are tunes composed for bells, and as their brief music so is this brief literature, restricted to the means and the opportunity, and full of vigor within these bonds. . . . The phrase, the melody, have both their home on the happy Ligurian coast. For though the sun-dials number the serene hours of northern gardens, they are more useful in the south and in the sun; and because of their use they take their place in the noble symbolic company standing by palace walls, the sun-dial for time, the cypress for death, wheat for life, and the vine for joy." Who can gauge the "nice arrests" of a teaching so memorable upon a nature attuned to present loveliness and to far vibrations from an immemorial past?

They were days of free gift for the years to be. Already the very young child Alice Thompson knew beauty with conscious delight, whether the sound of the Moonlight Sonata played by her mother to moonlight, or the color thrill against the sky of the almond blossoms. Always she knew freedom; for in their many lands the children played at large,

working at the Tuscan vintage or riding in a farmer's cart at Dorking. Only cruelty was forbidden. Once, as Mrs. Meynell remembered with distress to the day of her death, in the company of Swiss peasants they caught a fish, and thereafter their parents would not speak to them familiarly for days. "It was terrible," she said in memory. But all things gentle were free as the air.

So Alice Thompson was made by nature and life from childhood a citizen of the world, touched by the home-felt affections of many a local quality to which most of us are strangers, the little sister of many a "spirit of place."

No doubt her apprehensions were quickened through the repute won by the girl painter, her sister Elizabeth. Lady Butler's *Autobiography* tells a glad tale of the gaiety and pride of youthful life, of triumph and fêting—and suggests always by the side of the elder sister the younger, partaker in the efforts of laborious days and through the triumph of a most beautiful affection, in the delights of fame. She knew her own gift to be no less, and bided her time, hailing sometimes for herself as for her sister the lovely scenes at distance, but more characteristically wishing, as she suggests in "The Poet to his Childhood," the path of literary isolation, "a little higher, lonelier, in the solitary sun." But she used to the full the fine preparatory leisures.

As apt for the full awakening of her nature was the pressure of her busy middle years. Such a life

the brave might choose for the delivery of his best—an early fostering amid influences fine and fair, to be received, transformed to thought, and then the drive of strenuous and necessary labour, to compel the utmost. Before marriage the young poet had chosen and begun in addition to her verses the work of prose composition; and the marriage of 1876 to Mr. Wilfrid Meynell, who was to become the well-known journalist and editor, meant the entrance on the literary fellowship of a long lifetime. She was urged to production besides by lucky necessity and the consequence of her own success. Her years of early motherhood were the very years of her most notable fame, which, though deferred, came as surely as her sister's almost spectacular triumphs. "I worked hard on journalism that I loved, on my own subjects, during the years that I bore eight children," she has written. And the simple sentence tells all that we need to know of an experience taken gallantly. The weak nature is deadened by the heat of the day; the winged spirit which does not fall upon the thorns is gifted by demand.

Mrs. Meynell's was, as Coventry Patmore wrote, the nature of the thoroughbred, which could gallop without urging, without asking for pause. She has written with scorn of such literary ladies as cannot pursue their calling "with an avalanche of children pouring down the staircase." To the rumble of that avalanche she wrote those delicate essays which suggest deliberation and fastidious leisure. There

was time for varied and illuminating friendships, which were to continue the international affections of the international child, and lead her in the end even to the alien coast of the American Pacific, or nearer at home, to re-enforce her energies by knowledge of faith where faith gives power. In such friendship was rooted the homage of Coventry Patmore. The letters of George Meredith to Mrs. Meynell have left record of another, revealing delightfully the proud respect of the aging Meredith for his "Alicia Cerulea," in whose mind he rejoiced with Meredithian penetration. There was, as we know, time in plenty for unhurried kindness. Whoever has been in need of any sort has had sufficient title to the open hospitalities of Mr. and Mrs. Meynell. Their creative act in the saving and sustaining of Francis Thompson is matter of literary history. But never can be known the multitudinous acts of minor generosity, the encouraging of the wavering, of a slight but sure literary gift in search of recognition, or the spending of spirit on the fugitive acquaintance whose name the lady might come to forget, but to whom her temporary grace was to prove a lifelong memory and value. And each demand of the busy middle years was, however exhausting to the body, a stimulus to the mind, each call to life answered by a new "unfolding," a better instructed "vigilance."

After the turn of the century the production of Mrs. Meynell grew gradually less regular and less

abundant. There was with time a slackening of pressure; there was in later years the limitation of health; there grew with approaching age the belief that in prose, at least, she had said her word. But her work was frequent, often her best. She felt poetry and prose the stuff of different inspiration and different periods; and with the support of more settled leisure the penchant for poetry became a more familiar visitant. But for poetry or prose, for the end as for the beginning, whether writing in fatigue or in delight, her spirit sustained itself unslumbering, alert.

All her life the figure of the mind as shepherd dwelt in Mrs. Meynell's imagination. And inevitable has been the comparison to herself of her own "Shepherdess," who walks alone and keeps perpetual watch over the thoughts committed to her charge.

> Thou art my lady of delight,

wrote an anonymous poet in a *Pall Mall Gazette* of 1895, a few days after the appearance there of the "Shepherdess." And the reverent and loving tribute spoke well the allegiance of a long line of younger poet-critics who were to find in her their help and their idealism. The compliment has been so often repeated that one would avoid it, but there is nothing truer to be said.

> She is so circumspect and right,
> She has her soul to keep.

In the first number of *Last Poems,* "The Poet to her Book," written during her last year, Mrs. Meynell has applied the symbol to herself:

> Here are my thoughts alive within this fold,
> My simple sheep. Their shepherd, I grow wise
> As dearly, gravely, deeply I behold
> Their different eyes.
>
> O distant pastures in their blood! O streams
> From watersheds that fed them for this prison!
> Lights from aloft, midsummer suns in dreams,
> Set and arisen!

We may accept the words from her. Hers was an unsleeping care in solicitude "maternal" and chaste for the flocks committed to her charge, turning at last with the wistfulness at the end of life to yearn over "the fruitful few that are with young." Her mind waked while others slept, beheld itself in quietude and separateness, considering "dearly, gravely" what was to be said, forever holding itself blameworthy if one of these little thoughts should go astray or suffer neglect or be forgotten.

Her art, then, is definitely self-conscious. It takes stand by nature and theory against the literary accidents dear to apostles of fortuitous inspiration. To read and write, she would say, does not by any means come by nature; and by taking thought one might perhaps add a cubit to his stature. The critics interested in the spirit that blows where it lists, have not always liked and will not altogether like her method. But one of Mrs. Meynell's always

pregnant parentheses sets the right key for the critic who will understand her best:

"We are often told that the present age is spoiled by self-consciousness. Does it not rather suffer from the lack of it? A little self-consciousness results in hesitation and gaucherie. He who is completely conscious of himself is the hero, the artist. . . . It is impossible to attain to self-knowledge without genius."

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## CHAPTER II

### The Early Verse of Mrs. Meynell

The early verse of Mrs. Meynell is of a quality extraordinarily different from the characteristic product of her later years, which she came to consider most her own. She has written herself of her beginnings: "I began to write when I was about nine; it had no kind of promise in it, nothing noticeable or even excusable, except a good ear for prosody." Her actual juvenilia, which continued to be romantic fancies of knights and ladies, of arms and of love, have not been preserved. The earliest of her published poems were written at the age of eighteen.

Her first publication, the small volume of 1875, entitled *Preludes,* was an unpretentious triumph. She writes of these days: "I kept all my writings secret from shyness until I was nearly twenty, when I showed them to a dear friend, an American, and he read them to my father. From that day I had all the sympathy and interest of my father and mother. I had also the invaluable advice of a priest, a Jesuit, who expected great things of me and urged me to write prose also." The intimate faith of the friends who hoped was more than justified by the

prompt and notable reception of *Preludes* by the real poets.

Always the elder woman recalled with pride and affectionate gratitude the applause of the gruff Tennyson, and his recognition both of her modesty and of her achievement. Tennyson had asked to see her sister, the more celebrated Elizabeth Thompson, the battle painter; and Aubrey de Vere, who had made known to Tennyson the poetry of the younger sister, arranged a little visit for the meeting. "Others," said Tennyson, "weary me with their sendings, but your poems I have had to get for myself."

The contents of *Preludes* were nearly repeated in the *Poems* of 1893, printed when her prose had made its appropriate way. The thin green volume of 1875 had achieved but a limited circulation, despite the applause of the distinguished critics, more especially as a large proportion of the issue had been destroyed in a warehouse fire. In the book of 1893, five of the "Preludes" were dropped—"Pygmalion," "A Tryst that Failed," "The Poets," "At a Poet's Grave," and "A Study in Three Monologues with Interruptions"—all interesting to rediscover, but with the probable exception of "Pygmalion," expressive of no theme not more maturely developed elsewhere. Even with these exclusions the collection represented Mrs. Meynell's compromise with her friends, carrying more than one poem republished only to please others. To the depleted *Preludes*

were added seven more—"Future Poetry," "The Poet Sings to her Poet," "A Poet's Sonnet," "The Modern Poet," "A Parting," "Renouncement," and "Veni Creator." Even with these revisions from *Preludes,* the volume of 1893, represented, with only two changes of selection, by the section called *Early Poems* in the collected edition of 1923, may be taken as the proper basis for the study of her whole early work. The added poems, important in themselves, of a more distinct consistency, are still with one exception of the earlier mood, all under the inspiration of her poignant prime.

The poems are for the expression of youth singularly individual. A poet's first volume presents too frequently a gift of natural airs for which the singer has not quite caught the words. They are often perforce songs without exact words. No quite articulate language but a cry is audible within them. We are aware perhaps of meanings which are almost there but just elude our thought. We are conscious of poetic beckonings, but they turn out in the end to be no certain and authentic vision.

Often too, a youthful volume might be quite properly entitled Echoes, as the poet all unawares receives and returns to us some vibrations from the poetic air of his day. And in the verses of Alice Thompson we may fancy that we catch faintly sounding older airs or older themes. "When I was a child," she has written, "I had an adoration for Tennyson in his greater and wilder poems,

'Ulysses,' 'The Dying Swan,' and passages of 'In Memoriam'." But one watches with uncertainty for direct Tennyson influence upon these verses. A hint there is of the glorious pastoral lyric, "Come down, O maid!" in "The Poets," abandoned later by Mrs. Meynell; in "Daisy," a closer searching of the "Flower in the crannied wall" motif—nothing more. She has confessed too a childish devotion to Keats in his few greatest odes. And we find vagrant memories of Keats if only in the dwelling of her imagery on the sweetness of unheard melodies. We pass, besides, our "feet upon the flowers," with a tenderness to the physical touch of beauty as for the viewless loveliness which drifts from the darkling woods of Keats's eternal nightingale. Of Rossetti, for whom she had unqualified respect, we could find more reminiscence than the phrase memory of the flowers that "Keats, dying, felt growing over him." There is the borrowing of the word "circumspect" to describe the feminine innocence. A "Song of the Night at Daybreak" suggests "Woodspurge" in its bareness, infrequent to be sure with Rossetti. And there is a palpitation more than Rossetti's to the keenness of the sensuous impression, together with a wind-like purity which few except Mrs. Meynell could feel in Rossetti himself. But one remembers gladly Rossetti's deference for the young poet personally unknown, his recommendation of her sonnets to Hall Caine in his project for the *Sonnets of Three Centuries;* one is glad besides for the

guarantee given by the taste of this poet-critic for the incorrupt quality which she found in the greatest of the Pre-Raphaelites. Of the apprehensions more special to Wordsworth there is perhaps one trace thus early, if we compare Wordsworth's memory for "a tree, of man, one," recalled in his "Ode on Intimations of Immortality," with a delicate pause in "Soeur Monique":

> Yes, I am not far astray,
> But I guess you, as might one
> Pausing when young March is grey,
> In a violet-peopled day,
> All his thoughts go out to places that he knew,
> To his child home in the sun,
> To the fields of his regret,
> To one place i' the innocent March air,
> By one olive, and invent,
> The familiar form and scent
> Safely; a white violet
> Certainly is there.

But in all these passages, the echoes, if they be echoes, are taken up into the younger poetry. From the start Alice Thompson wrote her own verse, being of nature unlikely to imitate, or even to catch any lasting gleams of reflected light.

Most frequently our young poet recalls another for whom, despite her recognition of his poetic divinity, she had little personal patience, the young Shelley, spirit beautiful and swift. Like the young Shelley, she too speeds her "wild thoughts" along far "thought-wildernesses." Like the young Shelley,

she too watches the lustral transmutation of the elements, the ordered wandering of the heavenly spheres, and, as in the "Song of the Day to the Night," the passages of light and dark:

> We are not day and night, my fair,
> But one; it is an hour of hours.
> And thoughts that are not otherwhere,
> Are thoughts here 'mid the blown sea-flowers,
> This meeting and this dusk of ours.

One remembers Shelley merely because his young song is the song of youth, pulsing with desire for a baffling loveliness which escapes his aspiring phrase. And youth vibrates in these "preludes" of Alice Thompson.

One's primary impression, therefore, is of keen emotionalism. Here is the utterance of a mind which ranges the fresh fields of life in rapture and in awe. The "wild" desires are naïve and clear of call in the unreprinted "A Tryst that Failed":

> Though we have strayed from that place of heather
> Your cry and mine speed on together
> Above the Spring and the Summer weather.

They are less sentimental, more inward, in the address "To the Beloved":

> Thou art the form of melodies.
> And thou the ecstasy of prayers.

From their leap of emotion comes the lyricism of these earlier verses, their elastic tunefulness. One

hears, in any case, a music which bends at ease. It has a melody of which the author grew careless in later years when her emphasis for poetic theory and practice had altered.

Her usual song, like the typical song of youth, is of sorrow and tears. For youth follows with zest the beautiful ways of sadness, that unoppressive sadness which is the shadow and companion of poetic delight. There is rain on the golden summers; there comes a melting of the vision which, just because it is so fair, will assuredly refuse to stay. "In Autumn" trembles with the threat and scruple in all loveliness; it pities earth's days of rain and the scent of death among the leaves underfoot. The early meditations upon human experience, too, pause readily at the poignant situation. The abandoned "Three Monologues" conceives in Tennyson's manner a dramatic distress. In "San Lorenzo Giustiniano's Mother," the mother of the saint, childless since the youthful consecration of her son, is in later years visited and left again by a monk whose altered face recalls her child,—checked in her wistfulness by the consolation of "the Son who cannot change," though our human loves are but a dream and shifting vision. So the youthful fancy wrought in tenderness, choosing or receiving without choice, the consciousness which hurts, remembrancer of the grief which ushers and concludes:

> The dying and the birth
> Of the people of the earth.

The thought of her mind is, as she confesses in her sonnet of poetic confidence, a weight potential of pain:

> A small cloud full of rain upon my heart,
> And in mine arms, clasped, like a child in tears.

But the undertone of the poetry of youth is ever joy. And Alice Thompson's songs are, as she tells us, songs of the west-wind days dear to all her poetry and prose, days of gentle shine, of rapturous stir and strong cloud.

> Was earth cold or sunny, sweet,
> At the coming of your feet?

she wrote in "An Unmarked Festival," and to her waiting spirit each day was in some sense full with the treasures of the years, touching upon "memorable hills." One recognises the presence which the lost Coleridge remembered as poetry's essential secret, the joy which is given only to the pure in heart and in their purest experience.

It is the purity of this early verse which has arrested our simplest moments. Purity of heart or of art opens to the vision of us common folk a minor transfiguration. We confess our coarseness. And these tentative verses have already the sign of a spirit "unprofaned," with a virginal whiteness of which the poet is unaware. "Thoughts in Separation" are to her quite every-day thoughts, of the usual quality and accident.

We never meet; yet we meet day by day
Upon those hills of life, dim and immense;
The good we love, and sleep, our innocence.
O hills of life, high hills!

We are touched most of all that thoughts like these should seem quite natural to say in print, as a part of the common repertory of human feeling.

From the very purity of this early verse comes its intimacy. There is here at times a self-revelation, as unconscious of its daring as the turning of the flower to the sun. Hence, at least once or twice, the youthful poet wrote for us a poem of the most sacred self. Such is the celebrated "Renouncement," sonnet best known of all the work of Mrs. Meynell, and its freer and perhaps more beautiful companion poem, "After a Parting," both later in composition than most poems in the volume, written two years after the publication of *Preludes,* with all the guilelessness of the early work and the mature expressiveness of the graver power to come. Here she has said with finality which criticism has recognised, the struggle of the spirit dedicated to perfection to detach itself from a forbidden thought, a struggle the more difficult that the good of the renouncing soul seems forever one with the thought foregone:

Thou dost beset the path to every shrine;
My trembling thoughts discern
Thy goodness in the good for which I pine,
And if I turn but from one sin, I turn
Unto a smile of thine.

Such verse as this, of varying mass and significance, is of unvarying exquisiteness:

> My soft skies shine above,
> And on all seas the colours of a dove,
> And on all fields a flash of silver greys.

The poetry carries the melodies of passion, it is true, but in quiet tones, singing to itself, not caring to be heard. The poet goes with soft foot upon high paths, hushed with wonder of many "a small immortal thing." Her feeling hovers lightly over the bloom of delicate fields, or waits before the great simplicities of immediate mysteries:

> Heavy upon this little heart
> Presses its immortality.

The relation of soul to soul, the very mystery of self, is a wonder persistent to her poetry, and already present here. This is a poetry stretching hands beyond the personal limit, rejoicing at each slight bridging of the gulf between soul and soul. Its gladdest verses turn to images of symbolic union—of the day and the night, of the silences which stray subtly "amongst the winds, between the voices," of the shore and the visiting sea. But her thought returns to the loneliness of our separated spirits. There is always the knowledge of love's essential loneliness, its reserves and escapes, its thoughts which at the supreme moment evade and slip like

birds. So in the early sonnet, "My heart shall be thy garden," the given soul is presented in full beauty under the sun, but already the birds have flitted to other fields, "with wings that dip beyond the silver seas." The running of the tides is her best symbol for the reach and withdrawal of the human spirit, pressing in to flood the shore and brim the inland pool, only to wane as surely with the ebb, returning "with lessening farewells" to the inaccessible distance.

The marvel of youth's miracle, too, she feels fraught with the undetermined certainties of the years to be. She hails the future in the instant, not with youth's usual challenge and invitation, but in reverent premonition. She knows the touch of the present upon the future, closer than breathing, though impalpable. Of a very young composition Mrs. Meynell wrote of late: "I consider 'A Letter from a Girl to her own Old Age' a bad poem. The idea of writing it was good." The poem is at least singularly expressive of this girl mind, taking thought for innumerable morrows, to whom our memory looks back from the generation of her age. It is full of her "wild thoughts," which lived in this singularly gentle heart. Its imagery is of the wild winds of the flowering season, of driven clouds about the great hills that "storm" the sky, but foretells a calm about the fall of even, ardent in sympathy for the years and the sorrows which will assuredly need their comfort. For all these intimations she already

carried in her heart. And seldom did she achieve a more characteristic sonnet than the simple "Neophyte" written upon her conversion to Catholicism, reprinted on her memorial card when its prophecy was at last complete. Here she accepts from the unknown future its accidents and its devotions:

> Oh, rash! (I smile) to pledge my hidden wheat.
> I fold today at altars far apart
> Hands trembling with what toils? In their retreat
> I seal my love to be, my folded art.
> I light the tapers at my head and feet,
> And lay the crucifix on this silent heart.

Above all her young art brooded over the mystery of its own poetic consciousness. For the poet, refused the ultimate secrecies of nature, may have, more than nature, access to truths remote and unforetold:

> Sweet earth, we know thy dimmest mysteries,
> But he is lord of his.

A whole body, indeed, of Alice Thompson's early work has come to be classed under the title of *A Poet's Fancies*. Here all the songs of nature are symbols of the poetic desire. "The Spring to the Summer," "The Day to the Night," "The Moon to the Sun"—these are all cries of poet calling to poet. And among the early abandoned verses the most significant were already such Poet's Fancies. "The Poets," symbolising the Alps, represents the suffering of the exalted spirit, craving in its desolation to

be levelled with the plain, to be released from the "dark, unmeasured, windy mystery." "Pygmalion" is a better fable of the poet's unconscious miracle as an instrument of life, while he watches growing under his hand the form and substance of the human and beautiful flesh, which only the Divine spirit makes living without his agency or consciousness. Our special poet likes to fancy too a continuity of poetic generation, a communion of all the saints of poetry, in which, as in eternity, there is no distinction of time:

> I come from nothing; but from where
> Come the undying thoughts I bear?

She greets in kinship the singers yet to be, whose melody lies still unstirred, implicit in field and hill:

> O poet of the time to be,
> My conqueror, I began for thee.
>
> And I have set thy paths; I guide
> Thy blossoms on the wild hill-side.

For joy of poetry youth trembles in the early poems, with its prophetic spring, "miles and miles of unsprung wheat." The verse is like her "February," rich with meanings of the distant spring, in a world of the time before the flowers:

> I wander in a grey time that encloses
> June and the wild hedge roses.

Apt indeed for herself and "the future of her young art" is the image of the folded thing, the growth still unopened and still to be—the folded bud still to uncover, the folded shower, the folded wind, the dream of the February world "like a poet's face asleep in the grey morn."

One notes with respect the young poet's sure assumption of her own election to poetic privilege, hailed with sacrificial and devout fervour. It was a call heard in meekness. The knowledge of its coming she received as an Annunciation of grace, to be accepted in obedience and awe. Mrs. Meynell used to tell half-laughing of her childhood confidence in a future genius surely to be hers; but she never laughed at memory of the youthful poet, whose poetry shared both the humility and the pride of the poetic self, conscious at once of capacity and of limitation. So the best words of her exultant youth are words of poetic consecration:

> I dedicate my youth while spring is grey.

The future gift is a burden to be borne, a blessing to be carried thoughtfully, according to the word which shall come upon her. For this girl poet would choose to be—and here is her unique distinction which few of modern women poets would wish to dispute with her—the handmaid of the Lord.

## CHAPTER III

### Mrs. Meynell in Journalism: Foreword

Criticism of Mrs. Meynell in America has of late concerned itself too little with her prose. A tacit conception seems fairly widespread that the prose, despite its beauty, is of a quality less essential than the poetry, at least less permanent for the wear of years. Such was not the verdict of Mrs. Meynell's contemporaries during the years of her younger fame. Such is hardly the English verdict today. In our revision of estimates, then, the prose should challenge, if only by its unsuspected bulk, special consideration.

It is, we do well to remember, the prose of a journalist. Her later years gave opportunity for a more settled phrasing of judgments upon which she had tried her energies for half a lifetime. Yet even her good lovers often forget that the essays of her collected editions are for the most part salvage from years of punctual journalism. Here a sentence has been deleted; here a word has been nicely qualified; here a paragraph has been docked; here a limb cut off; here only a limb preserved; rarely a minor passage expanded to importance. But for the most part they stand as they came red-hot under the

pressure of the impending column. They represent too but a moderate fraction of her whole considerable product.

She came in her due time, for it was an age that liked the essay. The extraordinary development of the essay in the nineties, indeed, is a subject which, though still sparsely studied, has been recognised. It had already a veteran record in English from faraway beginnings. Since the modern days of the romantic critics, the personal confidence after the manner of the engaging Lamb had established among us for good its engaging way. And already, before the time of Mrs. Meynell, appreciation, that "fastidious and implacable and delicate Ariel," as she called it, had founded its sensitive and impressionistic fashion. Stevenson, of whom nobody had yet thought to speak ill, had combined an easier candour with an equal research for niceties. The essay had proved its virtues of delight. It had still to show its manifold varieties. And inevitably the end-of-the-century zest for the artistry of letters, its liberation at the touch of foreign models and foreign technique, reached a diverse flowering in this the easiest form of personal expressiveness. The nineties bloomed with a fresh and healthy growth of many colors.

We need to remind ourselves that the variety which has come was the creation of journalism. A small retrospect is sufficient to slacken our perpetually smart distinctions between journalism and lit-

erature. The natural home of the modern light essay was the weekly, and with the progress of the nineties came to be also the daily paper. We need to admit with greater respect the stuff of by no means "fugitive" value, given negligently to the English press for immediate dispersal and oblivion.

We may watch, if we will but turn to the old tomes for a few hours, the growing magazine quality of the English daily during the early nineties, its advance from the function of news-letter and political censor to be besides the genial friend of the family and master of mild intellectual revels. One should look back in the hunt for worthy things which we can by no means afford to lose, not alone for "lost leaders," as in the pleasant papers recaptured from the columns of Andrew Lang, but to lost middle articles, to lost book reviews. In America, at least, we need to remind ourselves of what we surely know, that such names as Alice Meynell, Andrew Lang, Rudyard Kipling, Lionel Johnson, G. S. Street, Arthur Symons, Vernon Lee, Evelyn Underhill, Max Beerbohm, E. V. Lucas, and, of course, G. K. Chesterton and G. B. S., are names of the newspapers.

The hunt for Mrs. Meynell's beginnings takes us far afield. The editors found her early. In 1876 she made her first review for the *Architect* and began her long work for the *Tablet*. And the chances were to multiply. The *Tablet* having discovered her value for the Catholic press, she con-

tinued for many years in hard work upon *Merry England,* giving some assistance upon the *Weekly Register.* The organs of art were not slow to hear of her, and one looks for many interests of her younger days in the *Magazine of Art* and the *Art Journal.* After the *Saturday Review,* delighted with a certain flaying of the Carlyles, invited contribution, she was free of the best weeklies. The *Spectator,* the *National Observer,* the *Speaker,* the *Outlook,* the *Illustrated London News,* the *Academy,* of late the *Observer,* secured her. She was, of course, writer to many monthlies, in later years notably the *Dublin Review* and the *London Mercury.* Probably none but the *Yellow Book* solicited in vain. Her work is frequent in the periodicals devoted to the interests of woman. For years she was known in American periodicals, especially in the Harper publications, in the *Atlantic Monthly,* the *North American Review,* the *Catholic World,* and, last but by no means least joyously read, the *Delineator.* It is, however, in the older English dailies that one finds her mind as it grew and looked about in her younger days. She was the "grammarian-in-chief" of whom the *World* liked to boast. She wrote more than one series for the *Daily Chronicle.* She wrote on demand for papers all. Her complete bibliography will continue to baffle the collector till the day when the newspaper tomes of the museums give up their dead.

Her most considerable service to journalism, and,

indeed, to English prose, was her long connection with the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the eighteen-nineties, days of the editorship of Harry Cust and Sir Douglas Straight. The glory of the *Pall Mall* in its literary period is a theme common to reminiscence of the authors who were a part of it, small or large. It could claim to be leader in the encroachment of the daily paper upon the magazine preserve. It was most readable of sheets, delightfully printed, delightfully edited—its leading articles seldom without caption of actual wit, and seldom without surprise worth hunting, from the beastly delights of a Jungle Story heard for the first time, to authentic poetry of the anonymous Occasional Verses, of which Mrs. Meynell's were, in the editor's opinion, the best. Mrs. Meynell's special contribution was to a column written by women,—notable among them, herself, Mrs. Elizabeth Pennell, and George Fleming,—entitled "The Wares of Autolycus," named after the "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles," and dedicated to the tastes and interests of women. "Autolycus" began 29 May, 1893. On Friday, 2 June, Mrs. Meynell made her first contribution, and she wrote thereafter a Friday column till, with 25 March, 1896, she changed to Wednesday. She continued the Wednesday column till the end of the Autolycus series, 28 December, 1898, and thereafter with the signature A. M. till 21 October, 1899. From that time her essays were irregular and infrequent; but the well-

known signature A. M. appears till 1905. An interesting group of sketches were the letter from America, from 12 October, 1901 to 12 April, 1902. Already after the death of R. A. M. Stevenson on 18 April, 1900, she had undertaken the work of art critic for the *Pall Mall,* printing her first signed review there on 1 May, 1902; and she carried on the work, signing her reviews, till 20 June, 1905. Here, then, in the regular weekly column of the *Pall Mall* were printed for the most part the majority of essays in *The Colour of Life, The Spirit of Place, Ceres' Runaway, Childhood, London Impressions,* and *The Second Person Singular.* Here she said at some time, in fashion tentative or final, the best that she had to say.

The "lost" columns of the *Pall Mall* are still worth the gleaning. Here is still alive, if one cares to look, many a lost "colour of life" and "spirit of place." Her path too, as she went, was strewn with wayfaring thoughts carelessly flung out, with capital phrase and capital comment, with luminous parentheses more revealing than larger matters which she cared to make conspicuous by recovery.

Here too and above all in the recurrence of motive, in the application of some special creed now to one theme and now to another, one learns her dearest tastes, her closest anxieties, her special prejudices, the standards which seemed to herself more especially her own. They are a various confusion if one tries to consider them together. But

to remember them is to remember Mrs. Meynell and what she meant.

Her subjects had the benefit of a sounder opportunism than is always allowed to journalists. She was never driven to ferret for sensation. She was fortunate to encounter editors who would let her say what she pleased, and a public willing to read what she was pleased to say.

So she wrote out here her life and thought—all that could be publicly shared. A convert to Catholicism in her girlhood, she gave through laborious years her best to the Church. Known as daughter of a connoisseur and sister of a famous painter, she pursued through rigorous seasons the censorship of painting; and her art criticism, though she has not cared to preserve it, makes a large proportion of her unrepublished work. Skilled amateur of language, she became leader in all bright games of phrase. Inheritor of a sure culture, she gave herself without timidity to a wide practice of literary estimate. The woman-journalist nonpareil, she became as matter of chance and course the journalist of woman. The mother of many children, she knew the child as he cryptically is, and went far to deliver childhood criticism from the blight of the namby-pamby. The familiar citizen of many worlds, she had always the unfailing theme of international comparison. She loved England with her mind and Italy with her heart, and could have fashioned forth a book, as Meredith said, upon Italy alone. Know-

ing the aspect of many skies, she became artist of landscape according to the almost abandoned art of simple description which we cannot quite do without. She was remembrancer of fine things which hurry forgets.

It will be profitable for the most part to group that prose rather according to themes than according to the columns in which it appeared. Upon *Merry England* and the *National Observer,* both periodicals singularly interesting in themselves, her gift was of a special quality best separately studied. But otherwise it will be simpler to look first at her thought itself, and only in passing to note date and place of primary publication. Recollection of her prose must be, of course, to a large extent, a survey of her contribution to the *Pall Mall Gazette,* her journalistic home.

Her prose, then, a firm note in the English journalism of the eighties, reached its full repute by a sudden bound in the glowing years of the early nineties. Seldom has prose attained swifter recognition. It was a beginning so easily accorded and at first so slightly challenged that the writer hardly knew the disappointments and excitements of the struggle. Perhaps she was acclaimed to the degree of misfortune,—lacking her due share of adversity for the literary novice, the valuable disciplines of failure. But she felt the heartening and expansion which comes from the rarely accorded acknowledgment.

From amid the chorus of somewhat ecstatic and uncritical adulation the sober estimate of E. K. Chambers in the *Academy*[1] may be selected as by no means an overstatement of contemporary attitude:

> In the realm of the more liberal essay, whose criticism is of life rather than of letters, Mrs. Meynell is admittedly queen.

Her work was heralded by the two veteran friends, Coventry Patmore and George Meredith. Patmore, in the *Saturday Review*,[2] passed perhaps the bounds of temperance. Meredith, always more reserved, and usually more critical, spoke in the *National Review*[3] with decision equally bold:

> A woman who thinks and can write, who does not disdain the school of journalism, and who brings novelty and poetic beauty, the devout but open mind, to her practice of it, bears promise that she will some day rank as one of the great Englishwomen of letters, at present counting humbly by computation beside their glorious French sisters in the art.

And his letter to Mrs. Meynell after his applause in print shows better in its eagerness of age his mellowed but unreserved honour:

> You partially console me as to the article. But I failed in doing what I wanted to do because of aiming with my heart and attempting to make it appear my head, so that neither

[1] 2 January, 1897.
[2] 13 June, 1896.
[3] August, 1896.

of them had fair play. Writing as a stranger, I should have done more justice to my desire and to you.

A less serious but not less revealing proof of her eminence during the nineties is found in the laughing protests of Max Beerbohm, not yet come into his own—especially in the skit entitled "Mrs. Meynell's Cowslip Wine," printed in *Tomorrow*.[1] The acclaim over Mrs. Meynell is compared to the thrill of a crowd when the queen with her equipage comes down the street:

> The crowd is the reading public; the mounted policeman is Mr. John Lane; the guardsmen are the literary critics; the lady is Mrs. Meynell; the homely carriage is her new book; the stalworth Highlanders are Mr. Coventry Patmore and Mr. George Meredith.

In a most engaging envy or the affectation thereof, the younger writer makes his acknowledgments to her style, "quite perfect in its sort," "full of fresh prunes and flawless prisms," but dreads none the less a future when "Mrs. Meynell shall have become a substitute for the English Sabbath," for a public which has not learned that "there are no finalities in style." She has sprung in the "panoply of her wisdom full grown from the Bodley Head," whereas the obscure arrival there of Mr. Max Beerbohm "at a back door" has passed for the most part unnoted. The jest is good-natured; the

[1] September, 1896.

acknowledgment all the better that it is reluctant; the challenge bears a clearer witness for its ruefulness. There could not be brighter proof of the fame of Mrs. Meynell in 1896, the year of the *Colour of Life* and the Patmore and Meredith championship.

Her prose then came not alone to its repute, but actually to its fulfilment in the nineties. Her mind was already mature, her thought in its early utterance directed in the straight line which it was to follow through the decades. To understand her, therefore, we do best to recall her richer and fuller youth. We should remember the conquering young journalist whose word was something of incantation to the elder contemporaries who loved her, and to the young imitators who offered her a deferential court.

## CHAPTER IV

### Mrs. Meynell and the Word in Prose

Mrs. Meynell's theory for prose is a theory of the word and of the phrase. Hence her importance in the abundant flowering of the literary essay in the nineties. For the *mot juste* has been called by Max Beerbohm, who knows whereof he speaks, the "Holy Grail of that period."[1] And although, like all Holy Grails, it was infrequently achieved, it was most energetically sought. Flaubert and more Flaubert represents Ford Maddox Hueffer's recollection of literary research among rising young authors of the time.[2] The new-felt zest for the word, a fresh dedication in English letters after Pater, was at least to contribute a better conscience for the nice exactitudes of which our English practice has been too often heedless.

Here, as always, Mrs. Meynell was of her age and yet curiously withdrawn. When she assembled the articles of her creed, she had read no page of Flaubert. She was, as she has remembered, but vaguely aware of the religion of the word which

[1] *Seven Men* (London, Heineman, 1919), p. 12; (New York, Knopf, 1920).
[2] *Thus to Revisit* (London, Chapman & Hall, 1921), p. 39.

had its ritual in the London about her. For the verbal achievements of her contemporaries she had a courteous and almost motherly friendliness. One remembers in her review of *Across the Plains* her pleasant applause for Stevenson's candour in the search: "Some of the authors of phrases successfully found produce them with an air as though the search had been—how shall we express it?—furtive. Stevenson makes the confession of the going in search to be a part of his very triumph, and he seems to look you in the face with joy." So she looked pleasantly on, but, as she might say, sequestered.

Her theory for prose concerned itself little with the order of the whole. Her rare applause for excellence of structure sounds almost perfunctory. Much more lively and spontaneous is the good word which she occasionally throws in for asymmetry. "He never denies himself anything," she used to complain of Thackeray. And in the search for her meaning we find her objection to be to Thackeray's special consistencies, his evenness of key and emotional tenor, which is, in the opinion of many, his claim to honour, but is in the taste of Mrs. Meynell a certain indulgence in defiance of life's normal irregularities. In like manner she demurs at the nice achievement of a Zola novel, so much more orderly than experience ever is. And her carelessness of mechanical measure for the essay is as deliberately adopted as her insistence upon the

shapes of poetry. One is startled to read an early chance enunciation of her sense for prose: "prose that is willing and able to wait upon its subject, to be fragmentary, to go aside, to watch, to attend, even as they do who keep guard upon the fitful coming and going of a young child—prose that has no symmetry to keep." It is a strange doctrine to receive from the poet whose structural habit is so absolute. It is a surprising doctrine from the artist of the phrase whom we shall find valuing in style only such things as are "costly."

To be priestess of the word Mrs. Meynell was wonderfully fitted by her life-long familiarity with many languages. Till the day of her death she spoke Genoese dialect to perfection. Early possessed of the freedom of foreign cities, she was exempt from the curse of Babel, hearing every man with readiness in his own tongue. Language was to her not a barrier but an enfranchisement. Of fine shades in language she became therefore the appropriate recorder. She rejoiced in the varieties of linguistic "counterchange," quick for the verbal turn most choicely relished by the foreigner. She knew, as in the lovely "Anima Pellegrina," the special value of local idiom, "freighted with such feeling as the very language keeps in store." And to what she called "international fun in words" she returned when other themes flagged. She maintained, especially in "Autolycus," a superior court of fine adjustments, where linguistic niceties met a

pleasant comment and decision. Her first article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* toyed with the phrase; almost her last formal essay was "An Article on Particles."

We are today for the most part colder in the quest. We could no longer—alas—find sufficient entertainment in the game which she proposes for winter evenings, the correction of the family pronunciation. But to Mrs. Meynell—and she knew better than most—the word was sacrosanct.

Nor did she consider such interpretation beneath the scope of high criticism, finding in language a master creation, revelation of our incremental human process. Utterance was to her perhaps the great human capacity. With neighborly understanding she takes us within the "shelter of dialect," as in the essays on Goldoni and Giacinta Gallina, where she enters into the homely habit of the homely Italian household. With tenderness she remembers the "narrow house" of the inarticulate, the dour pathos of peasant life, in its slight interchange of sympathy, its "formless, passive endurance," its scant "partakings of sorrows," its "little expression or expressiveness." The poverty lies in the denial of "the ultimate syllable and therefore of the ultimate experience," she writes in "Domus Augusta." "For doubtless right language enlarges the soul as no other power or influence may do."

The devotion to the capacities of English was an

early choice. She has recorded for us an actual recollection of a moment when the passion for English took her. Louis Blanc, she remembers, stood once on her grandfather's hearthrug and declared with assurance that the French and English have their separate uses—the French for literature, the English for business. And the small child, listening, stiffened with opposition and a conscious loyalty that never left her. Even for Italian, the natural tongue of her gladdest childhood, she had only a "secondary" though an ardent affection. She loved its courtesies, and for poetry its untranslatable ease of many syllables, its grace of phrase—the phrase itself "intellectual, impassioned and an epigram." But English was her glorious heritage, abundant in resource, a noble deposit left by ages of eager speech. She loved the dual ancestry of our English, and in "Counterchange" welcomed within our sentence "the splendour of foreign encounters." She loved the very remoteness of its derivations, its complex potencies, its subtlety, its nebulæ of suggestion and associative fineness. She takes issue, in one mood, with Emerson and his characterization of language as "fossil poetry." "What envious turn of the truth is this?" she writes. "All language is old brutality spiritualised. . . . Rank materialism is to be predicated of the origin of words, and the farther removed from that origin, the fitter will a word be to express a thought."

"Time charges language with mental meanings and makes it a fit instrument for the thought of an advanced age."

It was characteristic of Mrs. Meynell, that despite the enthusiasms, special to the decades of her youth, for the phrase Teutonic, she held by preference to the "remoteness of Latinity." She could appreciate—none better—the Anglo-Saxon directness, its sure stroke at the concrete sense, its power of pressure and intensity. To its Teutonic share, perhaps more than the critic would like to admit, English owes what she valued supremely in English, its "faculty of giving sudden greatness to a customary word." But she had a taste for refinement and overtones in the language which has forgotten its metaphor. "A hand-shoe! a finger-hat! a fore-word! Beautiful!" she cries in mocking irony of the Germanic craze. The Latin-English has its greater dangers, as she knew, its liability to inflation in all "corrupt followings" either of Gibbon or of Mr. Micawber. But its dignity is worth the risk. In a forgotten essay already quoted, "A Minor Benefaction of the Church," she lingers over a delightful list of benedictory Latinisms—"consider, confession, multitude, desolation, redeemer, fugitive, pasture, immortality"—and from the great maker of English phrase—"the multitudinous seas," and "unsubstantial death." Here is emotion recollected in tranquillity.

For the making of modern prose our language offers, to her thought, the challenge of hardship. The ages which have prepared the richness could not keep it new. The passing of feeling into formula is perpetual as the dead refuse of the waning seasons. Whoso, besides, in the past has applied "the cold touch of exaggeration," has forced the pitch or stretched the mood, has slackened the "elastic" phrase, has prepared a "strained and depreciated diction"—has left the language poorer than he found it. The modern writer in prose and verse undertakes a medium subtilized and infinitely potential, but out of which "some of the vitality has been written." To quicken the word to life and to more abundant life requires a miracle sufficient for any act of faith. It is the most difficult miracle of truth.

None therefore has written better than Mrs. Meynell of literary honesty. So far she has the words of eternal style. The platitudes, the stylistic admonitions of which the ends of the earth have long been weary, assume a new being in the conviction of her phrase. "To attend, to wait upon what you really think; not to interrupt yourself with too loud a word, not to translate your uncertainty by too pat a phrase, your moderation by a stress too emphatic." "Never to yield a moment to the common temptation of saying a thing because other people would probably have said it, or of begin-

ning a sentence to the inner ear and finishing it to the ear of the public—that is given to the few, and few care to attain to it."

One notes for the most part in Mrs. Meynell's theory of style a singular disregard for the reader or the hearer. One does not speak for the ear of the public. Once indeed she allows a slight admission that the "audience," if it be intelligent enough, has an interest and a right in language-making: "A great author should be anxious for effect or the result of his phrase upon the educated ear, but he should be lifted above anxiety for appearances or the result of his phrase upon the untaught." But for the most part she holds consistently to her dictum that the true writer must be not so much heard as overheard, when the reader is so lucky as to get within hearing. One composes, as it were, in the hearing and sight of God. The reader must take his chance. But the chance would seem to be fairly good.

Avoid the "ready-made" in language: this is the first and great commandment. Before the "jaded phrase" Mrs. Meynell had not alone disrelish for inferior taste, but indignation at evasion of an essential duty. There is in her mind a curious but evident parallel between the hardness of right language and the supreme hardness of prayer: "There should be nothing habitual in literature as there must not be in prayer; every movement should have a special intention, an impulse to itself, a separate

thought." The comparison alien to our common notions will seem strange only to those who conceive of style as chance and of religion as repose.

The true word is "fearless." It must be flung forth with courage, with abandonment of traditional safeties, trusted to wing its way, if necessary and if possible, on flights untried before. Conventional speech has "operated as a barrier" between man and man—to use the formal and inflated term hateful to Mrs. Meynell. Meredith, she thought, had the true valour, Meredith who "compelled the wild image to serve him."

Nothing true, furthermore, is "uncostly." For letters as for painting "there is no such thing as style without visible means of support." The creed of Mrs. Meynell demands in the writer "loyal pains." She is characteristically distrustful even of impulse in expression. "The most absolute of all human avowals takes time, is recollected and gathered close, and makes no such emphatic noise as might quench the sound of its own breathing and its own living heart. Candour is gentle, vigilant, and attentive to itself."

Truth may be or not, as the poet says, the highest thing which man may keep. It seems at any rate to be the hardest thing, and the devotee of literary sincerity is vowed to "close and watchful labour," if he is to be true to the fineness of sight, to the depth of mental experience. Literature should be, as with George Eliot, "the double cream of thought."

Mrs. Meynell was of old best known among critics by her special doctrine of "rejection," the title of an essay in the *National Observer* which delighted the austere. We should do ill to give it an over-emphasis. The author omitted it from her definitive edition. But it puts in convenient compass and in language ascetic as its message her constancy to renouncement as a principle of life, not alone in the name of the spirit but in the name of taste, of refinement, of original joys, and of the sacred word. "One who suggests to me that refinement is apt to be a mere negation has offered up a singular blunder in honour of robustiousness." Applied to style, rejection is the marriage to holy poverty. It constrains us to use the fan tirelessly upon our verbal chaff, to discard the "easy" mood into which, as she says elsewhere, "we speed on an idle impetus." It refuses effects of self-display; it throws no dust of specious wit. It calls for unsleeping watchfulness in our discreet denials. "The simplicity of literature, more sensitive, more threatened, and more important than other simplicities, needs a guard of honour."

Mrs. Meynell has not said the last word. This hieratic devotion to the religion of the phrase demands a self-searching which is remote perhaps from the last simplicity. One remembers in contrast (without quite comprehending the selection of Hudson for the ultimate praise) Conrad's admiration for the style of Hudson: "He writes as

the grass grows. The good God makes it to be there."[1] The creed of Mrs. Meynell is not the creed of a style which has lost itself to find itself. It may have therefore its exposures to the snares of the evil one.

But it is self-conscious only in innocence. It has remembered self in duty alone. It is therefore a creed sufficiently noble and austere to put the true believer in touch with vitalities of utterance. It accounts with beauty for Mrs. Meynell's special and private excellence in English prose.

So far from ready-made is Mrs. Meynell's own style that one is baffled to produce for her even a literary ancestry. She has called George Meredith master. But the deference is rather honour for the assured power of the larger genius than acknowledgment for value received within her own energies. The friendship with Meredith began, as we know, in his admiration for her style already full-grown in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The kinship with Charles Lamb, which has suggested itself to many, has consisted alone in their common knack for the lucky word and the will to work for it. The resemblance is plainer to the literary ancestry of Lamb and the phrases "choicely good" of the seventeenth century. As we turn the modern pages, we remember ever more genially the good Sir Thomas Browne "differencing himself more nearly and drawing

[1] Ford Maddox Hueffer, *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

into a lesser circle." These she knew with the exceptional interpretation of her father's guidance. But she was conscious of no direct influence upon her style except the influence of Lowell. She wanted only to write "modern prose" in a way to be found by herself.

And the special satisfaction in reading Mrs. Meynell's prose is to find a result so true to its intent. Her own essay is by choice an essay of the word. Like her creed, her style had in its most characteristic years only a secondary care for the organism of the whole. For structural efficiencies she had, probably powers, had she chosen such emphasis. The early, more formal contributions to the *Pen* and *Merry England* have the conventional and evident development easily sustained. The final criticism of the mellow *Hearts of Controversy* conforms sufficiently to the fashions of the more liberal unity. An occasional work of the nineties shows that the author could make capital symmetries when she cared to try. But the characteristic essay, as it developed in the *Pall Mall Gazette,* makes, as it goes, its veering track. It is "willing to wait upon its subject, to be fragmentary, to go aside." Its shape, if shape it may be called that sometimes has no shape distinguishable, occurs by chance. There are no technical pretensions.

Perhaps the journalistic production of these sketches a little determined their somewhat accidental formation. Whoso has a column to fill must

often govern his scheme by the humble intent more frequently adopted than confessed—"to produce something of a reasonable length that will do no harm to nobody." A column, to fit neatly within its iron-bound space, does frequently require some violence of pressure, more often a pull at the elastic end, or trails perhaps a cloud of vaguely related afterthought. A phrase crystallized to beauty may come of a miraculous moment. A rounded and finished unity is a less likely miracle for him who must feed the press.

We can understand, at least, the honest protest of Le Gallienne, respectful but with growing demur:[1]

> I have not as a rule found in her essays either the essayist's quality of ever wandering and yet ever arriving, or that quality of orderly sequence, that harmony of rhythm, that marks the true writer of poetic prose.

This is not, we must insist, a prose to be judged by the standard, and the commonly good standard, of orderly sequence. Le Gallienne, indeed, was in his younger criticism quick to note Mrs. Meynell's "rare respect for the unique word, which one apprehends to be the marked distinction of her prose." But we need not take the tone of leniency—excuse by "in spite of" and "nevertheless." Mrs. Meynell's essay is its own justification. Only by acceptance of her chosen carelessness for mechanical and rhetorical

[1] 5 January, 1897.

device do we understand the thing which she does sufficiently intend. Her style "goes free."

Mrs. Meynell remained, then, at her best, as many are bold to assert, easily superior amid her generation in her truth to the sheer word. Many are called to the literary honesty, but few are chosen to the verbal sincerity of genius. Hence the "unexpected" quality in her language. For the "original" phrase, foolishly so-called, is as one sadly reflects, only the right one. We go our literary ways, "seeking inventions fine." We handle our dormant vocabularies, hoping for some strange combination which shall raise them to a better resurrection. Mrs. Meynell has applied with consistency her creed—that the most finely exact word of thought, the most accurately responsive word of sense, is the only word which can forever make all things new. Her style is, as she meant, "in the very conception of the word, in its ante-natal history," and therefore "choice and authentic."

She has been known therefore as the maker of fine distinctions. Each sketch, each phrase, each word, has the keener "instancy." It achieves a directness alien to our normally slack vocabularies. These are the refinements, as Mrs. Meynell altogether meant, of vitality. True delicacy, she has told us, does not come of negation. It comes upon observation.

Her phrase has then at its quickest the effect of a minor revelation. It apprehends with a poignancy beyond the habitual reach. Before our eyes "a film

is cut," there comes a clarity. For Mrs. Meynell has wrought her purpose. Her phrase is enlarged from the servitude of habit, has escaped from the dominion of the ready-made. Here is, at her best, the victory which she saw in her master Lowell, the "freshness of intention" that finds the word "new for the day's work."

In her very directness lies the offense which her manner has sometimes given to the easy-going. There lies a difficulty in her nicety. We understand Meredith's unqualified honour for it. Here is, to be sure, no Meredithian stenography. Nor is there, despite her seventeenth-century proclivities, any considerable indulgence in ways perverse or recondite, with meaning personal, in defiance of the dictionary. But there is immediacy of stroke hard for the loose apprehension. A phrase too clear for our habitual use we are likely to call obscure.

In other ways her style holds rather by its vigours than by its allurements. Le Gallienne's complaint that it lacks rhythm has been mentioned; and the lack was probably of choice. She herself noted the less careful observance of prose rhythm to-day than of old. And now that the rhythm of prose is searched with mathematical exactitude, we notice with a mental start that Mrs. Meynell never relies upon that special lure. Not even once do we follow with her the lead of sound or take emotional cue from a phrase melody. The words do their work, as she willed, by the power of meaning. Or if there

is an effect of sound, it is never the soft-slipping cadence that lulls the literary acuteness. In her care for the energies of the phrase her sole value for sound is for its momentum. She likes the sensation of friction—"friction of water to the oar, friction of air to the pinion—friction that sensibly proves the use, the buoyancy, the act of language."

She took in all soberness her own instruction of "rejection." The self-denial of her phrase has made most constant impression upon the watch of successive critics. Sometimes there have been stirrings of impatience. Rejection is, according to one protest, "a creed of low vitality." "Her style wears a hair shirt," writes another. "It is symbolized," declares a third, by the prefix "un-." "Uncovenanted," "unprofaned"—such are her words, prepared with a consistency of delicate negatives. It is a style, to be sure, too circumspect for dashing risks, for the stampede of feeling which sometimes endears a writer by its very weakness, for "the scarlet, and the purple, and the aureoles" that, as Max Beerbohm reminded, others lay upon words. But it is sure witness to her creative dogma. Her abstinence made for truth, whether or not for simplicity, a "guard of honour."

There is then beneath the light of her style a fine gravity. It recollects itself as if for confession. "So many and subtle are the enemies of literature, not to be matched except by the enemies of spiritual

perfection." This is indeed a dedication of the phrase.

In this connection we cannot ignore the accusation so frequently made against Mrs. Meynell, of preciosity, of an ultra-refinement of phrase, a tendency "to nurse the travail of thought beyond its due." A clever article of the *Daily Chronicle* puts the case perhaps most boldly. A sentence is found "too perfectly precious for our planet. Perhaps it is almost too seriously magnificent for poor humanity. We know that the seraphic doctors in the seventh heaven talk in this way always. But most of us are not there yet." A deferential article in the *Bookman,* put not in the key of raillery but of profound respect, still finds the simplicity "fastidious and eclectic." "One could desire the plain daylight rather than the infinity of illuminations." A protest thus frequently repeated certainly contains truth. But there is probably less than seems.

An apparent evasiveness was quite accidentally wrought by slight alterations made at times in preparation for reprint. Mrs. Meynell's idea for revision we have observed to be a process largely of subtraction, a cutting of little elaborations which in her retrospective opinion the reader could well spare. The ruthless elimination of many an innocent transition, however slight the operation, has worked an elusive difficulty of sequence. The result suggests to the baffled reader a contemplative sub-

tlety which disdains the obvious resources of every-day clearness. The effort to make a passage simpler has worked by amusing luck an effect of deliberate remoteness. It was quite plain in its first shape.

The collected editions of Mrs. Meynell's prose, besides, give a disproportionate selection, representative only of her more abstract and "costly" thought. These little works of concentration, the more far-sought, the more closely contemplative, she has regarded with favour, rejecting as chaff, or at least of but fugitive value, the simpler studies, especially in her early manner. She discarded whatever sketch or criticism might be written by any able journalist of exceptional refinement, keeping only what was her "solitary" own, the style rich, in the unmistakable close tissue, which can be identified in her careful writing of the nineties—as the style of Mrs. Meynell and of nobody else. It is a style which we shall find first maturing in the *Scots' Observer* as early as 1889.

The young apprentice of the seventies and the eighties, the assured journalist of the nineties in her off-hand hours, possessed a freer and easier pen. She had a bold and nimble way, a more obvious and popular competence. A sample of the simpler method is amusing in a *Merry England* essay on the art of Burne-Jones. Almost any sentence will do: "Do not condemn him to rank with those whose art is altogether ready-made and without separate experience, for the reason that at least his habit is his

own and not another's. . . . It may be a little slovenly to draw always the same people, but the initial choice of the profile was an act of enterprise. It may be a little sickly to insist upon a mitigated feminine form to carry the attributes of St. Michael, King Cophetua, and the Angels of the Creation, but the first conviction that the mitigated feminine was all-sufficient for the drama of time and eternity was a matter of some decision. Mr. Burne-Jones cast a ladies' school for the parts of the heavenly host." Here is the same "enterprise" of her own which we recognize in her more delicate analyses. But the words are written at the desk of the journalist writing fast to be heard, not "overheard."

The close carefulness was assuredly no growth of decadence. It was the characteristic style of her fullest flush when she wrote in her surest vigour. It was the style of her most resolute honesty. One comes with time to prefer it, accepting it by her own standard as her best value since most securely hers.

But one admits at times an over-gravity. Mrs. Meynell has expressed her own danger: "Unfortunately the very habit of directness, vitality, and freedom from the habits of others tends to produce a habit of its own." And here in the occasional habit of her own manner, she deserves the charge of a preciosity peculiar to herself. There is, we must admit, at times the effect of too conscious research, the triumph of a phrase too choice for its need, a difficulty wrought by her very effort after righteous-

ness. It is a too strict obedience to the solemnity of the word.

But to the best of Mrs. Meynell's utterance there is, out of her "vigilance" and out of her gravity, a gnomic force peculiarly her own. She has written of bell tunes played from the Italian village campanili, composed in a rhythm and melody special to the simple bell alone. She has written, we know, of the sun-dial literature of her Italian gardens. And one is reminded of that dignity and composure, the tranquillity and "brief sufficiency" of that language. And here, once and again, in the prose of Mrs. Meynell is encountered the finished phrase, finished in the sense that the thought appears to have reached, as thought seldom reaches, its utterance. It has happened by this chance upon its essential shape. It were better if nobody should try again.

If such estimate be even occasionally right, it bears witness to a singular virtue. We have prose of far more liberal freedom, of a more driving energy, of a swifter sparkle, of a more humorous self-criticism. But off-hand at least, one thinks of nobody else for whom just this special and private achievement could be claimed.

## CHAPTER V

### Mrs. Meynell and "Merry England"

Mrs. Meynell should never be called a Catholic writer in the restricted sense of the term. She herself has distinguished between the writer of local and the writer of actual notability: "In many instances the choice of a larger or a smaller audience lies entirely with the author; in other cases theological sympathies may give him a place within the pale of the faith which he would not gain in the open competition of a mixed world." So she wrote in an early essay. Her own repute, as we have seen, was fairly won in competition. She wrote for both the smaller and the larger audience, but always with a truly catholic intent—to make her reader for the reading a little more a citizen of the world.

The *Tablet* was perhaps the first periodical to see its chance with her. Early, even in 1876, she sent thither at the editor's request an art review, and opened a contribution which was to continue irregularly almost till her death. In the same year she began her published literary criticism by a series in the *Tablet* on *Daniel Deronda.* Here was an adequate start, a subject worthy of her mettle, a theme besides of singular attraction in appreciation

of a woman artist working not from temperament but from power, writing with the quality which Mrs. Meynell was forever to demand—travail of spirit, the evidence of "loyal pains." One likes these old reviews, with their youthful assurance, their more than youthful discrimination, their dictatorial utterance already of sound wisdom, their rejoicing as of a strong spirit about to run a race. For the *Tablet* she continued her reviews of literary material, with here and there a chance essay upon some subject especially timely to the Catholic. Her main contribution to the *Tablet,* however, was a considerable body of art criticism given at intervals through at least nine years, 1888-97.

Undoubtedly, her most important work as Catholic journalist was the work which she shared with her husband on the periodicals of which he was editor, *Merry England* and the *Weekly Register.* Here they laboured together in a steady comradeship that involved at times the work of author, editor, and of proof-reader as well. On the *Weekly Register* Mrs. Meynell wrote some few reviews, including one on Aubrey de Vere and one on the subject which she was to choose so often, Coventry Patmore. But the *Weekly Register* was rather the work of Mr. Wilfrid Meynell than of his wife.

In *Merry England,* however, its full issue running from 1883 to 1895, Mrs. Meynell's assistance was all-important. Her signed articles are found from October, 1883, to March, 1895, and her con-

tributions may be traced until the end. *Merry England,* indeed, is the best source for the study of her early style. Conceived by the Meynells and their own from the start, it was in every sense their best work of joint enterprise. Mrs. Meynell contributed prodigally under various names. Occasionally she was Alice Oldcastle, by a pseudonym easily recognised for whoso knows at all the interesting sketches of Mr. Meynell over the signature of John Oldcastle. She wrote as Francis Phillimore in various essays of a somewhat more off-hand quality than her acknowledged pieces, but full of suggestions, touched here and there by her deepest thought, with bits of her boldest comment. Hers was the largest part of the informal sections occurring almost constantly in the earlier numbers and frequently in the later, *Reviews and Views,* a title devised by Mr. Meynell and first in the long line of titles built on a similar model, *Views and Reviews, Verses and Reverses, etc.* They present literary odds and ends and fragmentary criticism which most magazines must maintain for the sake of the short-winded reader. These are teeming not with wreckage of broken gossip, but with essays in embryo, rich with chance wisdom on letters and painting, specially delightful as revealing more freely than elsewhere what Mrs. Meynell thought of her younger contemporaries. They have the unmistakable phrasing of her unmistakable style. And at last there is a variety of distinguished essays signed Alice Meynell,

sometimes reprints from the *Pall Mall Gazette* or more frequently the *National Observer,* often printed for the first time in *Merry England.* These last have almost all save a few poems been abandoned.

*Merry England* began in a call to brotherhood. For to Mr. and Mrs. Meynell the liberation of compassion was the central force of Catholic Christianity. The magazine took its name from the Wordsworth sonnet which was its motto:

> They called thee Merry England in old times.

And, like the sonnet, it was bent upon a creative wish for the recovery of the national joy, amid the joylessness of the English poor. Its initial article, astonishingly signed, "George Saintsbury," recalls the ideals of "Young England" and the young Disraeli. The magazine refused, to be sure, "the cant of medievalism no less than the cant of modern days." But "Merry England," said *Reviews and Views,* "used to mean brave rather than comic or boisterous England, brave and merry even in the midst of sorrow, by reason of its clear conscience, and its fresh and primitive feeling, and its living hope in a hereafter. Frankly accepting the conditions of modern England," ran the Manifesto, "we would have it a merry England too."

The magazine hardly continued to be a social organ. Perhaps it was diverted, and to its advan-

tage, left freer to fulfill a secondary function. More probably, it recognised its proper share in the good work: its most acceptable service was to reveal to the English Catholic his part in the national heritage. It served the Church in England sufficiently as a light, a reminder of its cultural possession.

It was a bold deed for a popular magazine to risk a conscious return to the past. But the English Catholic was conceived as special heir even more than the Protestant of "the backward immortality which is so rich in actual experience." The magazine ventured then on many an interesting series. Here are the *Monuments of England,* treasures "delved from Dugdale," remembrance in charming and pious pilgrimage of footprints of saints. Here is a wealth of antiquarian lore found and popularised.

For all that, the magazine was a reflection of its present, its arts, its fiction, its poetry, its crafts, its manners, its distresses. It concerned itself most willingly with subjects naturally dear to the Catholic heart, from Brother Bernard to the Duke of Norfolk, with the visit of a Stevenson to a Trappist monastery or with the explorations of Catholic visitors from abroad "in darkest England." It gave honour to prelates of diverse camps, full of recognition for both a Newman and a Manning. The magazine grew with time, rather to its loss as Protestants may think, more definitely Catholic in the special sense of the word. But it remained a

periodical good and pleasant to the general reader, of diverse themes, with names on its title pages as unsectarian as that of W. H. Hudson, often found, and of Andrew Lang, and William Morris.

It became too what perhaps it was most deeply meant to be, a nursing place where young Catholic genius might be planted and become full of growing. The established writers of the faith, Coventry Patmore, and Aubrey de Vere, gave it their support. The Cardinal Archbishop, Katharine Tynan, Wilfrid Ward contributed, and many more. There is a throng of younger names. Its principal offering in verse was, of course, the immense contribution of Francis Thompson, the first and greatest fruit of the Meynell venture. Here a youth calling himself Lionel Johnson appeared for the first time in print; here began another youth calling himself Hillary Belloc. But perhaps not less than the gift of Francis Thompson to *Merry England* was the gift of Mrs. Meynell.

Here are some of her commentaries on life which won her immediate fame upon their appearance in the reprint of years after. Here is the shy beginning of her second venture into poetry. Here already is her literary criticism with the assurance of the veteran of letters. Now and then is suggested a special and personal counsel of perfection.

Be of "the centre," not of "the province." The dictum which Mrs. Meynell probably took originally from Matthew Arnold, she easily made her own by

adoption. It is a counsel which suggests itself more than once in *Merry England.* And though later it ceases to be articulate, it remains in her writings for all readers implicit till the end. It is a reminder that touches us all despite our modern cants of liberality by which we set such store. We have all our retreats of prejudice, where we become at entrance intellectually dumb and blind. "A separation from the many, a herding within a little village of the intellect with those who share a cherished opinion, whatever it may be—this is a kind of provincialism which triumphs over all place and time." So we indulge "the uneasy certainties of bigotry." We are convinced; we are emphatic; we assert. Our emphasis is but the sign of our intellectual remoteness. The provincial spirit lives enclosed, "in horrible nearness to others of his kind," "in hopeless remoteness from those who are not of his kind." The quotation is from an essay of 1883 on "Hobbies" in the series, "Bogies of Provincial Life." Mrs. Meynell is speaking here of literal provincialism. But the words set the theme for more than one essay of broader application. There was assuredly no chosen policy; there was no din of iteration. But the reader might profit by the suggestion. The mind of the English Catholic, to convert "the soul of the nation," must be "of the centre."

Such words are always apt. And the Catholic in a Protestant country, one paradoxically supposes,

must be forever on his guard against segregation of thought. Any religious minority highly conscious of itself, however universal its affiliations, must be in one sense a sect within its own environment. A growing minority has often, to be sure, compensating advantages. It has the hope and health of a destiny yet to be fulfilled. But it does well if it can avoid at all points, the emphasis, the assertion, the claim to originate and to possess a good which it only receives or shares. All the world trots in blinders for the best of the way. The Catholic in a Protestant country does even better than the rest when he avoids them.

The Catholic Church in a Protestant country must besides be a Church Militant, a Defender of the Faith. And here lurks a whole set of sectarian dangers. We know wartime psychology, the tendency to count too anxiously our superior advantages, to belittle the foe, to make none but strategic retreats. No Church Militant, one would suppose, will ever quite avoid the "uneasy certainties." Valuable then in *Merry England,* as elsewhere, was Mrs. Meynell's reminder of "the centre." She understood in more than a philological or polemic sense the nature of catholicity, the breadth of taste and understanding which should liberate its humane spirit. Her most reasonable service then, here as in much of her journalism, was the correction of potential narrowness. Its advices were most discreetly given. To the Catholic they might well be

the more acceptable since they accompanied a glad and unreserved faith in the Church, its disciplines and its obediences. Hers were no "uneasy certainties of bigotry." Catholics, she would feel, if occasion for a special hint arose, are free of a Church so potent that the defence needs no aid from makeshifts.

She was indeed stout champion of the Church with some of the fresh energy more frequent in a convert than in the possessor of an inherited loyalty. To the Protestant reader there sounds rarely but sometimes a note of asperity toward things Protestant which suggests even in Mrs. Meynell some slight deviation from the "centre." She is perhaps too severe upon the "fool's paradise" of the Protestant mind, though we cannot pretend not to understand her. "If the Catholic has seemed in general judgement scrupulous and illiberal, we are to learn that the conscientious attitude of the Catholic mind comprises three things which are not recognised in the best and purest ethics outside the Church—disillusion, humility, fear." She saw, furthermore, like so many of her contemporaries, an England which said, "I am rich; I am wealthy; I have need of nothing"; and "knew not that she was wretched and miserable, and poor and naked—to be raised up and clothed in white garments." But Mrs. Meynell verged upon contempt when she watched "an England grunting in the straw with her herd of material scientists."

But hasty conclusions from these bits of early journalism are soon corrected by personal remembrance of Mrs. Meynell, her fine tolerance and appreciation for good things Anglican and all good things English. And passages of "assertion," of "emphasis" are few indeed. They never occur in her more deliberate writing. They seem slight flares of hasty thought, which interrupt but sparsely. One does Mrs. Meynell injustice by the citation; for hers is not the provincial voice.

There is the summons to the liberality of letters. Taking her word from a papal utterance of Leo XIII in praise and encouragement of literature, she chooses the auspicious moment to urge the "literary glory" and the need for more: "In giving his enthusiastic praise to the literary glory the sovereign Pontiff doubtless attests the truth that, while the Church checks and resists so much of what is temporarily considered progress, she yet intends to contradict the age in no lawful growth, no lawful tendency." "Literature," she continues, "is essentially the glory of the present." "It must be," she reminds, "a literature of the present, not of the past." Her own most important work for *Merry England* was unquestionably her literary criticism.

On the high worth, already evident, of the Catholic literary production, she writes with ardour; for the consciousness of worth is a creative force. There was plenty to show. In the eighties and nineties, as to-day, the Catholic Church had in England a

literary guard of singular brilliance. Francis Thompson spoke adequately for himself in *Merry England,* the publication of such poems as "The Hound of Heaven" and "Maria Assunta" being a sufficient vindication of Catholic poetry. For the tardily recognised, she has the word of assurance; for the still aspiring the word of pleasure and incentive. She writes with greatest zest of Aubrey de Vere, the friend of younger days, and of Coventry Patmore, who was to be the intimate friend of the later. The muster roll is presented with pride of conscious dignity: "It ought not to be necessary, and perhaps it is not"—so she writes of special verses—"to recall to the minds of readers lines so great, poetry so true, given to the Catholics of England with all other great achievements of their brothers in the faith, to add to their intellectual dignity and comfort. . . ."

Was Mrs. Meynell's own judgment always of "the centre"? Or was there in her estimates of co-religionists a special kindliness? On the whole there is no bias, one would say, except the emphasis inevitable to periodicals careful for the consideration of a selected group. If a special set of writers be preferred for attention, they may sometimes receive disproportionate stress, a notice more particular than would be theirs "in the open competition of a mixed world." If the field of comparison be limited, the standard becomes in some degree more liable to indulgence. Never, we are sure, is praise ac-

corded here except to work of real value known for sincere. Perhaps Mrs. Meynell's words of approval, "lofty," "celestial," "elect," have less caution than we are used to in the temperance of her mature vocabulary. The minor poets, such as Elinor Sweetman and Rosa Mulholland, receive no grudging due. But her admirations among her Catholic sisters were by no means indiscriminate. She was bold for faint praise when she felt it deserved, as we may know from her comment for Adelaide Procter's work: "Something easy and slight said about great things." One hesitates at the judgment which pronounces Aubrey de Vere "almost invariably great and only occasionally cold"; but one respects the poet of gentle values and humane purities. Already in 1885 Mrs. Meynell's response to Coventry Patmore is keyed to exaltation. This is not, however, the bias of friendship; the friendship was still to be. It is assuredly not Catholic propaganda; the words are of honesty all compact. And Mrs. Meynell's numerous reviews in *Merry England,* properly careful of Catholic production, concern in great majority the world beyond the pale, the wide English world of thought and experience—whether Catholic or Protestant she cared not.

Steadily, with a liberality beyond the wont of reviewers in magazines dedicated to any especial cause, she brought to her columns the vision of the outer world. One gets good remembrance of the good old novelists, of Trollope and his dulness, "dull

as dear life is dull"; of Charles Reade and his impulse "urgent, fresh, and strong" for the "hopes and fears of men and women who have never lived." "What reader oppressed with actuality will forget such an obligation?" We follow through his lectures the already saddened Ruskin, irresistible still. There is Tennyson, in his garden, and in his "garden poetry," and Browning still mighty, still mellow. We meet the strong young Kipling, still the soldier poet of the *Barrack Room Ballads* coming and to come, and Henley with his loud voice still resonant. And her dearest pride in Aubrey de Vere, one suspects, is her consciousness of his undoubted catholicity in the society of English letters, his wide and intimate relation with the best of contemporary genius.

There is, too, for matters not literary a counsel of good sense and laughing moderation in the heat of controversy. Accept satire without perversity. Receive ridicule without blind resentment. Adopt a necessary reform with frankness and simplicity. A loyal pride in the Church takes thereby no risks. The Catholics of England must never disappoint a generous hope, "inasmuch as they are citizens of no mean city."

Wise besides is a quiet warning against dulness in faith, against contempt for the foe, blind resistance, for example, to the problems of science, so vital a part of modern thought. Before the mysteries of nature "the difficulties of science are not to

be set aside by a scoff at 'so-called science,' or 'so-called philosophy.' The Catholic must strive, whether our dispute be with the noble opponents or with the ignoble; whether our contention is with the ritualist over the infinitely little of the rubric, or with a scientist over the infinitely great of the stars, or with a thinker over the infinitely difficult of the human heart." But one must strive in soberness and serenity, in a catholicity of understanding beyond the reach of any dweller in a little village of the mind.

One understands the better her unwillingness to regard the notable Catholic writers of her day as in any sense a school or group. At least she never perceived or discussed an actual common consciousness among her Catholic contemporaries. Incentive, impetus, they must surely have received from the knowledge of one another, from the sense of a common pride and a common loyalty. They hailed one another as they passed and wished one another good speed. But Mrs. Meynell preferred to think of them as serving in individual ways in the world of letters, dedicated to individual ideals. So best, she may have thought, would they remain, one and all, potent servants of the Church, abiding for her honour in the true "centre" of the English literary life.

## CHAPTER VI

### Mrs. Meynell and "The National Observer"

Mrs. Meynell's rise to recognised eminence in the world of letters was hastened at least by her connection with the weekly known at first as the *Scots' Observer,* later, after 22 November, 1890, as the *National Observer.* It owed its distinction during its brilliant period unquestionably to W. E. Henley, great at least as an editor. Henley had known Mrs. Meynell during his editorship of the *Magazine of Art* for which she wrote during several years. Her copiousness and resource, her swift and sure speech, had become sufficiently evident some time before the *National Observer.* But probably not Henley or she herself understood the special ingredient which her contributions were to give the new weekly. Henley's deference for her, indeed, had a special value all the more significant in a mind seldom erring on the side of praise. When her service had been largely transferred to other periodicals, he still wrote, "This is to say that if you have any more of the *Rhythm of Life,* I shall be only too proud to take them on." In an interview upon the *National Observer* in 1894 he said: "I think I may say that I know of no paper from which so many

books have been dug up in so short a time. There was Mrs. Meynell's *Rhythm of Life* and the *Barrack Room Ballads.*" Through Henley too she made her first acquaintance with Mr. John Lane, who was to give continuance to her vogue by publication at the Bodley Head of the *Rhythm of Life.* "A certain publisher," wrote Henley to Mrs. Meynell, 16 February, 1892, "wants to reprint some of your articles from the *National Observer.* Shall I encourage him to hope?" But we may account her best debt to Henley the natural growth from contagion of a brilliant enterprise.

One still catches from personal recollections and written memoirs the glow of the group which surrounded Henley, a glad and noisy comitatus who took to themselves the name of "Henley's young men," with a pride in the loyalty perhaps not surpassed since the "tribe of Ben." The biography of Henley by L. C. Cornford, even more perhaps the recollections of Mrs. Pennell and of Ford Maddox Hueffer, to mention but a few, are agleam with vivid memories. Still the eyes of our elder friends brighten at the memory of magnificent evenings, of the talk and intellectual play which followed the burly figure of the great editor. "All was powerfully, all was curiously, all was singularly written," said Francis Watt. "It seemed one man's work." And its intelligent public watched for its next variety as for a predestined delight. "How we shouted and wrote each other notes over Mrs. Meynell's 'Rejec-

tion!'" said a reminiscent journalist years after.

The spectacle of Mrs. Meynell in the official company of Henley's young men, although we are told that she lived remote from that call and counter-cry, is always a matter of amusement. Una and the lion make but a moderate parallel. For the *National Observer* roared terribly upon its way, with a gusto of ferocity, capital at hating, leaping with a heavy paw wherever the dust was thickest.

It cherished, one remembers, the cult of war for which Henley is otherwise remembered. Here, with admission to be sure of war's essential evil, is the emphasis upon its "bright side," less visible to any eye today. Here, in good English, and not in German, which we like to consider the native tongue of militarism, is the pride of force, "that last argument of kings," "the ultimate reason of government." War is upheld, as we have so often heard it since, as the school of virtue, "the provider of extraordinary occasion," the creator of generosities and of forlorn sacrifice. How familiar they sound, the lost illusions, in pages still unyellowed!

The army meant the empire, the expansion of British power through all the seven seas. Hence the martial stir of the pages, the stout trumpet-call which Kipling above all others gave, reminder irresistible and commanding of the far-flung battle-line of the conquering British arms. And a soberer championship of Tommy Atkins was a serious business of the paper. Throughout too with larger vision is a

prophetic deference to the claims and potencies of the expanding empire, African, Canadian, Australian, a fore-knowledge not quite defined of coming imperial reconstructions, a projecting guess at a federation of the future which the future has still upon its lap.

It was not to the cult of militarism that Mrs. Meynell lent her hand. She knew well enough, if only from association with the artistic choice of her sister, the battle painter—the moral potentialities of war. Her strength during the late war was proof enough of her mettle. She was indeed among the first, in a *Merry England* review, to give full credit to the *Barrack Room Ballads,* to take with complete seriousness the poetry of Kipling, finding, for instance, in the "Ballad of East and West," "a sweep and élan which would put heart into an amœba." But in one slight passage of the *Pall Mall Gazette,* in answer to Henley, with a slight turn of her hand she cuts under and within the boast of the robustious champion—that war is the great instrument of evolution for the survival of the fittest: "War necessarily puts out the highest life; it is the prudent famine, the careful poverty, the deliberate pestilence, that quench the lowest."

Mrs. Meynell seems as remote from the audacity of Henley's unquenchable attacks upon persons and all vested proprieties of democracy. For the paper maintained its stout Conservatism not as a shield but as a raiding adversary. "It was," said a remin-

iscent sympathizer, "one of the few delights of those who have not bowed the knee in the house of democratic politics, democratic literature, democratic art, democratic acting, . . . waging a brilliant battle against Dulness, Decadence, Deciduity." And so it kept up with unflagging spirit a battle of the theatres, battle of the arts, battle of the critics, a battle of the politicians, cruelly, with unmitigated power to the elbow, and unmitigated malice of wit, expert in every method of artillery, but with strong preference for the heavy barrage.

The personal aggressions of the paper carried an impudence not surpassed in the history of lampoon. The authentic Scotch reviewers had laid down the law with too heavy a hand for such turns of the ultimate outrageousness. Swift, very genius of satire, thorough as a law of nature, lacked the youthful gusto for such attacks as these renewed like the eagle. Aristophanes himself was not more fertile in resources, more rapid and overwhelming with a rain of ridicule descending alike upon the just and the unjust, upon the predetermined enemy—any leader of men who held democratic affiliations or had achieved a dominance over the multitude.

Gladstone was the victim perpetually offered up, harried relentlessly as if barked around by a hundred vigorous dogs—as the arch-betrayer, the whiffler, the word-eater, the bland master of compromise, the "Pecksniff" of English politics. Parnell was circled with a colder hatred, "the man whom nothing

could be proved against," held an insidious Sinon, born to beguile the British mind from its legitimate and immediate British interests. Or perhaps General Booth took his turn, suspect as master of a mob, who might well in his redemptive burrowings chance to dig under some one of the social foundations. And there was Cardinal Manning, more suave leader of the multitude, played upon with strokes of lighter irony, whether he ably intervened in the Dock Strike or "sat for his picture for the good of the Church."

So the paper attacked all agitation for the sake of Demos—no more a favorite with Henley than of old with Aristophanes. It recognized with respect indeed the "growing vibrating sympathy with the poor," admitted the principle that the old political economy had a devil in it, allowed in Socialistic platforms a just humanitarianism. But its force went rather to the propagation of distrust for all radical agitation. It girded skillfully at the conception of "amalgamated ideas," felt less suitable in Labour than in Conservatism. It pointed out with clever skill and humorous clarity the evident difficulties in being "a Christian friend of labour." Its call was rather to distrust than to sympathy. It preached temperance in apprehension even in the face of recognised distress.

Indiscriminately too it attacked whatever it felt to be sentimentalism in any form. There was to be no "cockering crime," no "social tinkering." The

forces of the insidious enemy were usually felt to be sufficiently described by the ironic turn given to the harmless adjective "new." To the *National Observer* the New Unionism is a term not of differentiation but of raillery. The New Asceticism is the canting creed of the hypocrite teetotaler. At the New Ghostliness the protest is pleasanter—just a friendly exhortation to the *revenants* to become again real ghosts and to dwell once more in the company of the gods. The "New Elegance" is the spirit of the misguided American critic, at work to darken American counsel without knowledge of the English heritage. And most sentimental of all to the mind of the *National Observer* is the modern Philistine squeamishness, its conventional priggishness dubbed the "New Puritanism" or by a happier coinage, "Impuritanism." For such causes interpreted as insincere or over-vocalised the *National Observer* had the indiscriminate term, "Bleat."

In the name of art indeed the *National Observer* spoke with an assault no less importunate and impertinent, but with an impassioned championship of those essential values always in danger from the popular desire to read a story in a painting. This is to Henley the last baseness of democratic taste. His dictum is the formula of Whistler that "Art is on the town." The heavy hand deals impartially to be sure, at one time against the Academy rated as the stronghold of depravity, or at other hours against the Arts and Crafts, dubbed the "crafty

artsmen," whose handiwork seems rendered negligible by their Socialism. But the chief crime of the Arts and Crafts is evidently their derivation from the Ruskin influence. Ruskinism, it appears, is the main enemy of art—Ruskinism cursed to the tenth generation, but somehow feared. It championed, we are led to believe, "the production of square yards of literature in the flat." It was the New Light, Methodism in Art, this reminder of a value other than visual or technical, for a thrice malign quality, moral, literary, emotional, doctrinaire. The burden grows monotonous. But one recognises in the *National Observer* a sincere apostolate. These are canons familiar enough to-day if not in Henley's time. Art for instruction, art for emotion, art for truth, we have heard quite often enough, is "art upon the town."

When other democratic victims failed, there was always America, hated with that frankness which is the next best thing to an *entente cordial* and maybe more promising for future understanding. She is loathed for her cupidities, for her politics, understood as over-reaching and insidious, for her apathy to fine emotions: "America is a country which, while making vast strides in material prosperity, has astonishingly developed the art of life without making any progress at all in the arts of the higher and more spiritual order. . . . What is there English in the unhappy crew we see to-day, greedy and oleaginous, and unrestrained, spawning on the mid-

den of Europe, with a strange affinity for the lower races, developing the worst qualities of them all?" Or in a more mellow key of tirade: "They drink ice-water, and they have infamously treated their Indians, and they have produced Dr. Talmage."

America is despised above all for her claim to independence of literary scope, whereas not even a literature of any sort can be accorded as her due. To speak justly, the *National Observer* has its more tolerant moods in which a good word upon America is all the more significant from its infrequence. There is the delightful exhortation to Mark Twain "not in drink but in tears" to become again "the good Mark Twain, the original of Huck, the parent of Jim, the nigger." There is the respect, tempered but hearty, for Bret Harte, who could establish "a community of interest between the whittled creatures of cities and the gnarled salvage of the redwood forest." But these are among the humane exceptions.

In America's claim to literary initiative lies the cause of the *National Observer's* dislike. She is despised for her fancy to be splendidly barbaric, her craving for a character tremendous and magnificently plain to accord with her youth in the catalogue of nations. In vain. "One is convinced that the essence of America is conventionality."

From all such horse-play of the mind Mrs. Meynell seems remote indeed, but not because she was averse to controversy. A scuffle would always have

seemed to her a clumsy method. But hers was an intrepid spirit enough, roused to mettle by a congenial indignation. She too had the pen of valour. One catches, especially from her early pages, where she wrote in haste, learning her trade, a distinct impression that she liked the sword-play. In the *Saturday Review,* a periodical unafraid, in the unsigned work of *Merry England,* and in her lighter squibs for the *National Observer,* there is an effectual neatness of attack. Her political contributions to the *National Observer* are unimportant; she left for others the political stroke, but she liked the give-and-take of combat. And whether she drove at a vulgarity, an anapest, or an act of license, she could be, when she cared to be, a respectable adversary. We turn from her quick little charges with the satisfaction of a spectator at a game.

Henley, naturally enough, did not rely on Mrs. Meynell to help him on his lampoons. She could have shared at no time the relish of the *National Observer* for the delights of heckling the opponent. In the original version of some essays, to be sure, one finds traces of ridicule upon a person. The essay on Oliver Wendell Holmes, for instance, heaps upon a mighty bonfire the claims to humour of Jerome K. Jerome. The "Unit of the World," a firm but delicate divergence from an "intention" of Oscar Wilde, presents to our astonishment a direct multitudinous assault upon the personal and unfortunate Oscar. But such startling phenomena

have disappeared before the *Rhythm of Life* reprint. Here the essay upon Holmes has resumed a mellow and wise appreciation for the quality of Holmes himself. The "Unit of the World" takes only a respectful issue with a small article of the aesthete's creed. One feels amused, and assured that in the original Henley, in accord with his well-known custom, seldom applied to Mrs. Meynell, had contributed to the text his editorial heightening—and that in the reprint Mrs. Meynell had simply returned to her appropriate dignity.

Nor did Mrs. Meynell share with the *National Observer* its apprehensions before the advent of a democratic economy. We have remembered her Socialism, steady and law-abiding, but unafraid. We might notice too more than once, if we wished, her affinity in opinion to a thinker for whom she had little patience, Matthew Arnold—their common faith in the better self of the corporate body to save the state. But of these matters she did not write, leaving to the more technically instructed the work of propaganda.

Least of all did she share with the *National Observer* its dread of "social tinkerings." Rather than coldness of heart she would have risked letting loose what the paper called "the seven devils of sentimentality"—a very considerable risk to be sure. But to Mrs. Meynell's mind, never for an instant sentimental, was always present the background to our hurried life of poverty unchallenged, of unem-

ployment and unrelief, able to destroy any satisfactory social complacence. She wrote never in gush, never in "bleat." But she remembered the crossing-sweeper of Manchester Square, the faded vegetable on the stale counters of Hammersmith, the far-tramping armies of the unemployed who came for the dole of the Little Sisters of the Poor. She felt, as few besides, the gracelessness of poverty, the tragedy of dulness and animal suffering turned in upon itself. She would tolerate no "evasion of the daily dues of man to man."

In art criticism, at least, Mrs. Meynell was in partial understanding with the platform of the *National Observer*. Her technical criticism we have seen to have been made elsewhere. But she shared fully the *National Observer's* scorn for trivialities and for debasements. She would have no more respect than Henley for the "Bible and Spectacle School." But Mrs. Meynell had for her part a better moderation than Henley, a discretion which kept her from the extremes and monotony of Pharisaism. She recognised as clearly that art is not literature; but she recognised that there might be a limit to what the human ear could endure on the theme. In her essay on Mrs. Adrian Stokes,[1] as often, she girds with a humorous irony at the perpetual dinning of the Whistler school: "Let the dead bury their dead. We need no longer hear hard things said about the anecdote and its literary in-

[1] *Magazine of Art*, 1901.

terest. The suburbs themselves have long been instructed that the anecdote and the literary interest are all wrong, and no one at Clapham would dare admire a picture because it tells a story. Let the critic then consider his work more than done on this point, and let him allow the twentieth century to give back to painting all visible things. . . ."

In face of the anti-Ruskinian bluster too one is glad to remember her comprehension, as far as possible removed from the broad and blasphemous condemnations of the *National Observer.* She could detect with clarity the inconsistencies of the waning prophet, could note with courage his importation of extraneous issues into the plane of art, could understand the growing insurgency from the dictator, but could admit with no less frankness the disenchantment from ancient humbug which his word has wrought upon painting, his extraordinary contribution to the future. She could even abide the Arts and Crafts.

Although Mrs. Meynell offered little direct comment upon the galleries to the *National Observer,* one recognises in frequent essays the touch which the habit of art criticism could alone give her. The slight but springing essay on "Unstable Equilibrium," is the natural note of the critic who has watched with impatience the faulty drawing of the human shape and the futilities of figures painted "infirm of purpose, soft as moths." "The Unit of the World" also, defending against Oscar Wilde the

thesis that man in nature is the measure of our sense for size, has its bright value as the word of the trained seer, used to the watching of proportions and perspective.

The lovely essay, "The Point of Honour," is as true a revelation as we shall find of Mrs. Meynell the connoisseur. It is a study of Impressionism, as English art conceived it in her generation—at once an appreciation and a warning. She acknowledges the right of genius to assert its better vision than that of the multitude. She allows and safeguards with the anxiety of a Whistler art's authority by virtue of its better knowledge. But with an apprehension both discreet and wise she warns against pretensions to a specious superiority unfounded on real experience, or to a convention and a cryptic technique not demanded by a true theory of vision. Here, as usually in the art criticism of Mrs. Meynell, we welcome her evenness and temperance, which contrast agreeably with the more ponderous repetitions of the Henley assaults.

As one rereads these leaves from the art critic's note-book, one regrets the more Mrs. Meynell's expressed wish that her work in this field should not be seriously considered. Her scruple is understood. In the mass of constant production much hurried and even mechanical work was rushed to the press. Mrs. Meynell, besides, was not a trained painter knowing from pains and failure the art of which she wrote. But even a cursory survey of the art criti-

cism in the dailies and weeklies of the nineties, will show in contrast, with the effect of positive relief, the quality in the business of her eye and style. Her comments more frequently than not have a "value," or rather a luminosity as from the overhead light of a good gallery. Her reference to a picture has not the mere rattle of the conventional appraisal. It recaptures not alone the critical but the pleasurable moment of the critic before the canvas with a recovery rare enough indeed in the most assured performance of the "regular trade." One understands Mr. Sargent's value for her criticism, his choice of her to write the introduction to his reproduced sketches. One wishes for more authorized specimens of her method than the few delightful prefaces. But one respects her wish for oblivion. "A woman has a right to her own silences."

In her contributions on American themes Mrs. Meynell bettered the instruction of the *National Observer*. The special emphasis of her satire came to her probably from this accidental association. A later chapter must make fuller reference to the main body of her American criticism, genial on the whole and friendly. But here raillery was chiefly in order; and she obviously enjoyed herself in the practice. In her capital essays, "New Worldliness," "Decivilized," "Oliver Wendell Holmes," she could follow honestly and with relish the line of least resistance, the journalistic habit of ridicule toward things American. And her satire, good-tempered

and discriminating, is a neater, more effectual thing than the usual bludgeon stroke.

Fastidious to her finger-tips, she had a dread of cheapness as of the death. Quite in the *National Observer* vein, therefore, she attacks our penchant for things "mentally inexpensive." The quotation is from "Decivilized," an essay which was not immediately inspired by Americans but by Colonial antics. But the side-shafts at the States make none the less a palpable hit. The sensitive American must continue to feel uneasy as he reads this mockery, of a past, it is true, but of a past from which he unquestionably derives: "The New Englander hastened to assure you with so self-denying a face that he did not wear war-paint, that it became doubly difficult to communicate to him that you had suspected him of nothing wilder than a second-hand dress coat." Not yet can America be safely exempt from warnings against the futilities of trash, "the denature of whatever things are lovely and strong." The choice indeed for "trash in the fulness of its insimplicity," is the only vulgarity perhaps which Mrs. Meynell would not recommend to mercy.

In the essay on Oliver Wendell Holmes at least she ventures on the kindlier estimate of American literary gifts. She betrays, to be sure, no riot of enthusiasm. But there is delight in the best of Holmes, a pleasure in the escape behind the trivialities of the "New Humour" which unworthily derives from him, in the healthy temperance of his laugh

which has "set the literature of a hemisphere to the tune of mirth." There is applause for the watchfulness of Holmes, "unpreoccupied and alert," and for his fancy gay and open-eyed. Here is no niggardly praise for the stuff which Mrs. Meynell can freely honour.

But she shared with the *National Observer* its essential criticism upon literary America. She too disliked the American brag, its promise to the world of an enormous yield for unexploited fecundities. She too deplored what she felt to be a mistake in self-knowledge. The man of the new soil, "transatlantic, colonial," "faces you, bronzed, with a self-conviction of savagery. He writes and recites poems about ranches and canyons as if they were designed to betray the recklessness of his nature and to reveal the good that lurks in the lawless ways of a young society. . . . Even now English voices . . . are consistently calling upon America to begin. . . . Whereas there is no beginning for her, but instead a continuity which only a constant care can guide into sustained refinement." Such a warning is entered in the spirit of the *National Observer,* though better-mannered, intended not for abuse but for correction.

For matters literary on the whole Mrs. Meynell was in the best possible milieu for the fostering of her growth. The paper's standard of style was a standard which she could altogether respect, a standard which demanded above all vitality in words,

words which cut through habit and convention. Its dicta upon form sprinkled here and there from different hands are always of a sort congenial to her. She must have liked, for instance, an essay by the young G. S. Street, on "The Straightforward Style," "meaning any slipshod phrase you please if it be hackneyed." She would have approved without reserve the fine applause bestowed upon a fellow journalist, who "never descends to phrase-making" but "sustains an unobtrusive felicity of diction." And the *National Observer* words of commendation for worthy prose are all terms in her roll of honour—"reserved, elastic, trenchant, placid, poignant." One likes to find in the words of Henley and Mrs. Meynell for each other's style the ring of unqualified approval. Henley, who has reserves enough in commendation of her poetry, has no reserves about her prose, called in the *National Observer* "elastic as steel, withal well governed, void of all violence." One understands his disappointments as her contributions grew less: "Are you never going to write for me again?" But Mrs. Meynell never discontinued her honour for the work of Henley himself, and praised him always in language spontaneous and glad. We have mentioned her notices of him in *Merry England*. She protests at the Henley extremes, the over-liberality or more frequently acerbity in judgment, a lack of "sensitive justice" in certain pronouncements. But "against the instruction of Mr. Henley's distinguished and

happy, pure, triumphant English there is no dissent."

And there were plenty of others to honour in the company of Henley's young men. Mr. Cornford and others have recalled the many delightful books which found their inception in this paper. Andrew Lang was felt as a close friend if an infrequent contributor. Thomas Hardy did his part. R. L. S. sent here among other things his letters upon Father Damien before the day of the broken friendship. Barrie too gave, if not his best, his pleasant and familiar chat. Frederick Greenwood wrote here still in the firm level manner of his strong force. T. E. Brown gave the *Fo'cas'le Yarns* beloved of Mrs. Meynell. Arthur Morrison is here, unsparing in his *Tales of Mean Streets*. Here are the children of Kenneth Graham's *Golden Age*. Sometimes there is the sparkle of an easy tale by H. B. Marriott Watson, on the lighter motif of how a man kissed a maid; sometimes a heart-pang with H. D. Lowry at some dumb misery of the Cornish poor. There were fine horns of elfland, delicate poetic voices, as of Katharine Tynan and Graham R. Tomson. There was the irrepressible satirist whose name seemed to be legion. There was the considerable contribution of Henley's own poetry. Much we remember besides the *Rhythm of Life* and the *Barrack Room Ballads*. But we may decide in the end that Henley was right to mention first of all in his recollections the offering of Mrs. Meynell.

The poetic contribution is small, but characteristic in her two or three short pieces. "The Parting," published 31 May, 1890, but written many years before its publication, shares the poignancy of her early voice. In "Veni Creator," 2 August, 1890, we have a significant anticipation of her later way.

More frequent are book reviews, unsigned for the most part, but to be identified for the quality of their phrasing. More than once we refer to her estimate of the young Stevenson of *Across the Plains,* fresh and willing to value his touch of discovery, his occasional leap to power, "something uncovenanted which is the gift of the great." For the unimaginable message of Tolstoi's *Ivan Ilyich* there is swift intuition with characteristic indignation at a translation felt unworthy. For Marie Bashkirtseff's "realism in action," there is amusement and respect. On all the book reviews, here as elsewhere, is spent the concentrated regard which few are willing to spare upon a book review. Mr. Frederick Page has remembered in a specially delicate memorial in the *Tablet*[1] Mrs. Meynell's truth to her own principle—that men must write generously for oblivion, must seek and find in the sacrifices of journalism a worth for which the "honours of mortality" are sufficient.

But other honours than the honours of mortality will surely be paid to the best of Mrs. Meynell's

[1] 2 December, 1922.

essays in the *National Observer*. They are essays of her favourite type, of the sort to which she has given the name of "Commentaries." They are for instance the "Rhythm of Life," "Pathos," "Domus Angusta," the famous "Rejection," and others of a more occasional value, such as "The Flower," "Pocket Vocabularies," "Penultimate Caricature." These are of the sort which we come to feel her most characteristic contribution to the world of letters. One questions, indeed, if she ever surpassed them, or ever gave again within an equal space so large a proportion of her finest yield. They present the criticism to which Mr. E. K. Chambers referred—"the more liberal essay, whose criticism is rather of life than of letters."

The reflective fragments, too brief to be called studies, too rich and assured to be called sketches, appear frequently in Mrs. Meynell's work of the nineties apart from the columns of the *National Observer*. They will be better studied therefore in a short chapter by themselves which can refer as well to the *Pall Mall Gazette* and to *Merry England*. One bears in mind, however, that the essay by which she is most frequently remembered, the essay which she valued most among her own diversities, came to life in the pages of the *National Observer*.

## CHAPTER VII

### "Commentaries"

"IT is a rather melancholy lot to be born observant," Mrs. Meynell wrote once in laughter and half earnest. And again: "No man of absent mind is without some hourly deliverance. It is on the present mind that presses the burden of the present world."

"A perpetual presence of mind" is the happiest description, if we may steal her words, for Mrs. Meynell's more general "Commentaries" upon life. Her perception is more easily tested when it is concentrated on the special themes for which we find her marked in journalism. But hers is equally—for she teaches paradox—a present mind at large. Her observation waits upon life, watches the face of the waters, catching the "slow sparkle" of the surface or some small heave of a tidal motion which is proof and symbol of far cosmic relations. Her "Commentaries" include, of course, her more ambitious contributions to the reflective essay. They include besides several valuable strictures upon literature, in which literature is treated for the time not as the work of "solitary" art, but in reflection of contemporary fashions and tempers. They

should include surely in addition the miscellaneous fragments of wit and wisdom, in by-the-way and afterthought, in the quick-darting tangential asides of the earlier "Autolycus" columns.

The comment is in its simplest form a mere twinkle of observation for little affairs. It catches a shaft of elfish light on a line of small grotesque. It may note but "the hen, constant and unkilled in the street, wearing her unrivalled feminine air of practical life." It may rip a slight web of literary tradition and point out to our discomfiture that the treasured lines:

> But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
> I would not change for thine,

make no sense at all save the opposite of the poet's meaning and ours. It may marvel in bus or railway carriage at "the high passion of property" when all travellers unite in search for a lost bag or purse, moved by the only touch of nature in which we can be entirely sure that the whole world is kin.

It notes in comfortable ridicule our tricks and our manners. It dips easily over the edge of satire in friendly but oblique stroke at our absurd formalities, our slight but accepted inconsistencies, our little human negligences and ignorances, in accidental and entertaining diversity. "Smale Foules" —to take one example out of fifty—a witty and

humane little essay, touches not so much cruelty as absence of humour in the fashionable woman, who ventures "to use the wing of a bird and to call it herself." For the manners of the Briton standing awkwardly in the international comparison, Mrs. Meynell is habitually solicitous. "Manners maketh men" is her reminder, not alone in the essay of the name. She knows the Englishman on the long road of European travel, jealously on guard against the conspiracy of the rascal foreigner to cheat him of the extra franc. She knows him in the shops of Paris without the tranquil tongue of polite deference, with no courteous "Monsieur and Madame" for the attendant who serves. For the refusal of beggars he lacks the gentle and therefore effectual word which admits at least the fellowship of our brother creature even in the necessary churlishness of rejection. For the public street the Englishman has no Italian graces which can turn formality into carnival. When a "*festa*" is due, his hereditary equivalent is the grosser "feast"; for preparatory fast has not lightened his imagination.

In more deliberate vein Mrs. Meynell pricks shortcomings in the British literary taste. Characteristic is her disdain for the contemporary variety of literary Philistine, who mistakes prurience for freedom. For the sex obsession of her literary day, in the blessing of which we still abide, she has no civility to spare. "Powerful is for the time the minor critic's word for sexual. . . . In all ages

there has been a close, unconfessed struggle to put something in the place of literary talent. . . . Just now the thing that is pushing by force of quality and force of numbers into the place of art is mere impropriety. . . . Philistinism consists of this perpetual act of substitution, of adulteration, whatever the thing substituted may happen to be. Domestic and undomestic fashions are equally Philistinish in the Philistine. . . . From the point of view of raw art there is not a penny to choose."[1]

Several more formal essays preserved in reprint show each a directing shaft of satire. She has ridiculed in "Donkey Races" a static theatre confirmed in slowness till its idea of advance becomes a perpetual retard. In "The Audience" she has jeered at the catering of the contemporary stage to the hearers, till the audience with their play of emotion and reaction become the chief performers, and the actors but humble recipients of the cue. In "Popular Burlesque" and "Penultimate Caricature" she has rebuked a note vulgar and unchivalrous, a note of banter and contumely in Victorian humour, whether of literature or of the street. In "A Point of Biography" she has chided the penchant of personal history to protract details of disease and of "unessential death," in contrast to the good taste of nature. "Where are they, all the dying, all the dead, of the populous wood? Where do they hide their little last hours? Where are they buried?

[1] "Autolycus," 7 June, 1895.

Under what gay custom and decent habit?" We are well advised to imitate their modesty and their silence, for Mrs. Meynell will have no parade of sentiment in letters or in life.

Especially representative of her therefore is the capital essay of 1890 on "Pathos." Here with wit and masterly skill the lady of the gentle heart derides the droppings of warm tears so liberally supplied by the popular critic, the turning to sensibility of literature's beloved absurdities, where the meaning is laughter pure and undefiled. "For literature has its privilege to treat things singly without the afterthoughts of life." The supreme unintelligence, one decides for the time, is importunate sensibility: " 'It is bred now of your mud by the operation of your sun. 'Tis a strange serpent, and the tears of it are wet.' " Nowhere else perhaps is the satirical note of Mrs. Meynell more characteristic, more intrepid.

The vapours had no chance in her literary psychology. She who has been known so often as interpreter of grief, has given more surely than Stevenson the summons to a right gladness of living. But her recoil from the dismal is not, like Stevenson's, in the name of duty, "our great task of happiness," but in the name of grace and light. If beauty touches us, let us not, like the Carlyles, "teach each other sadness." Let us find "a gayer resignation to seeing our capacities for delight un-

fulfilled." Let us avoid the common "ingratitude for a gaiety which overspreads the whole teeming, devouring world of life." Mrs. Meynell had always a lively contempt for the ugliness of melancholy. She opposed a stout front to what she felt to be "the advancing wave of modern pessimism."

In such sentences as have been quoted her gravity has forgotten satire. Enlightened gravity indeed is the right source of her unquenchable wit. For all its brilliance Mrs. Meynell is not usually at her highest in derision. She has not the ebullience of mood or the passion of indignation required for derision at its best. We may for the most part prefer her spirit when it goes entirely free, not busy to deride, but intent on the bright pleasure of intellectual detection.

The detection is keenest always on the track of the paradox. To her paradox indeed we recur in any comment upon Mrs. Meynell, although she has maintained with her generation a pleasant quarrel for its paradoxical excesses, its panting for "the unexpected phrase" and the unexpected thought.

It would not occur to anybody to deny our predilection. We have long been amorous of the shock in literary sensation, from the needle prick of the Wilde epigram to the rude sting of the Shaw "gadfly." We have become used to Hilaire Belloc. And the paradox as commonly conceived, the spark of contradiction, is no longer a secret. Thanks to

the popularity of Mr. Chesterton, his method, though by no means his vision, has ceased to be a miracle.

But the revelation of literal paradox, which is simply "the unexpected," is always a primary if unconscious demand upon the faculty of genius. To transcend the commonplace, we are well agreed, is to acclaim the miracle. Our salute for art achieved is always in some sense the spirit of delight rushing upon discovery. The act of creation is in one way or another a new act. It carries a surprise like the surprise of sunshine—giver of illusion perhaps, "sun without which everything would look just like what it is," or again searcher of reality, quickening to the recognition of unregarded truth.

And the paradox, as it is commonly understood, the paradox of contradiction, is no vain thing, though we may make of it a jugglery or stretch it to the deadness of automatism. It is, at its cheapest, sign of a mental stirring, worthy at least in dexterity. In right health it is product of a mind alert to significant relations. At best it is a master-word shaped to apparent incongruity by the pressure of interior powers. It records a touch from the depth of the commonly impalpable obscure. For the truly questing spirit brushes, as it passes, the hidden infinitude of contradiction.

Mrs. Meynell, indeed, never wished her ridicule to be taken literally, for she has confessed the habit when she has most laughed, and has attacked in

better paradoxes than most of us can make. Paradox, indeed, lightly resonant, has come to be acknowledged the essential quality of her work at its best both in prose and verse. This habit of mind she shared with Patmore.

Throughout the prose of Mrs. Meynell it is a perpetual surprise ready to startle forever at any chance encounter on the face of life. It comes from the very feel of the air, the "soft battery" of the tempest. It is latent in all her bright reading of landscape. It is her sound doctrine for letters, her very creed of "rejection," that "he who saveth his art shall lose it." It becomes almost a necessity in her interpretation of life: "Some things must gain in mystery before we can at all begin to think about them."

The deeper paradox cleared to "spiritual sense" is a recurrent theme in her reflective writing best read with her poetry as gloss. To such as these in especial she has given the name of "Commentaries." They are commentaries indeed; but the name suggests too local a habitation. They are reveries, which begin, as said a sympathetic press notice, "here and there at such and such an hour, and end with a spiritual reach." But the meditation is never slackened to dreaming indulgence. It records a consciousness listening for news below the obvious and the familiar, apparently vagrant, but never passive, awaiting a sure enlightenment. Thus in the title essay of the *Rhythm of Life* the recur-

rence and periodic waning of interior experiences is conceived, the flux and ebb of "the tides of the mind," the sense of presence dependent upon absence, the alternate visitations to even the most "single spirit" of ecstasy and desolation. In "Solitude" she broods over the strange union in loneliness of mother and child, the continuity in separation of the personal life. In "Innocence and Experience" she records even a subtler paradox—the dependence of both innocence and experience upon the "necessary and noble isolation of man from man." "Perfect personal distinctness of experience would be in literature a delicate innocence." In such fashion the "vigilance" of the critic's spirit turns and returns to the ideal and preservation of its "solitude."

About just such essays centre the divergences in estimate of Mrs. Meynell as essayist. Here the critics who make the special protest against her ceremony of method present their most convincing case. They find an over-gravity, like the occasional touch in her style of over-seriousness, in approach to a familiar theme! They are sometimes right. There is limitation in the self-criticism of this critic. Still today we protest now and then at the fine spinning of a semi-trivial idea, at a thoroughness of research which a modest subject can hardly bear. The oft-cited "Woman in Grey" does indeed show the strain of tired hours, balances on its theme with an

agility too soberly maintained. There is a danger which Mrs. Meynell does not always escape.

It is, however, in her discovery upon the obvious that her mastery is assured. Coventry Patmore, who found her superior to Emerson and comparable to Goethe and Hegel, made for her no greater claim. Comparison with Goethe or Hegel seems irrelevant enough. But we can do no more wisely than copy Patmore's explicit praise: "It is very easy to speak splendidly and profusely about things which transcend speech, but . . . to avoid with sedulous reverence the things which are beyond the focus of the human eye, and to direct attention effectively to those which are well within it, though they have hitherto been undiscerned through lack of attention or the astounding imperfection of common vision for the reality of common things, is a very different attainment."[1] As friendly for the essays though less ecstatic was the praise of the *Daily Chronicle*. "They are full of insight into just those obvious things which most people miss for want of time and contemplation." Today we have ceased with a will to search for the new ideas. The notion of such a hunt strikes our habit as a quaint fancy. To have made but one platitude come alive should be held a sufficient act of genius. From the familiar essayist we await nowadays as a matter of course what was *par excellence* the gift of Mrs. Meynell, the simple

[1] "Mrs. Meynell" in *Principle in Art* (London, Bell, 1907), p. 152.

magic to reveal the familiar, unperceived because it is directly before our eyes.

Henley, at least, for whose periodical so many of the Commentaries were written, knew better than to find Mrs. Meynell deficient because her discoveries were within the common. Impatient always of the trite, fastidious among delicacies despite his journalistic roughness, he knew her worth. Noisy and outrageous as he was recognised to be, he felt always her single and "unexpected" quality. "Her mind," said the *National Observer,* "naturally wanders among the deep and essential matters of life." Henley knew, with the reverence of the lion for the royal virgin, the value of this special contribution to his paper, worldly, political, sentimental, humorous, familiar, and exquisite by turns.

So in the pages of the *National Observer,* as often elsewhere, we find these meditations unsigned for the most part, but unmistakable even without our knowledge of their reappearance in the *Rhythm of Life.* Little by-paths of retirement, small retards in our progress anywhither, they are, wayside retreats from dust and noise. We are close to the fray. We have come apart to rest awhile, though not for an instant to nap. Her double power, then, of quickness and quiet both at once, Mrs. Meynell's special contribution to the English prose essay, was already revealed in the early years, her principal gift to the *National Observer.*

## CHAPTER VIII

### Mrs. Meynell and America

"I LOVE America and Americans. I wrote 'Decivilised' rather thoughtlessly," said Mrs. Meynell in a recent letter, repenting in her gentle heart one of those imagined sins of satire which the world would not willingly spare.

As a reviewer of American books, for *Merry England,* the *Spectator,* and most frequently the *Saturday Review,* she had her lucid idea of us before the days of the *National Observer.* It grew of study conducted at long range, bookish, of the library rather than of life, though already there was the helpful commentary of American friends. Her early reviews reveal, of course, fairly large blind spots. A conception of the American people derived from the American novel appears today, when we meet it, an even quainter thing. But the international reviewer has always an advantage. He judges mostly by details of which the writer is even unaware. To his ear the novelist, in particular, lays his mind open in unconscious confession, reveals his environment not only in what is said but in what is taken for granted, by language accepted, by standards assumed, by habits presented, not known

for habits but mistaken for natural laws. The writer of local colour must set forth the secret sins of his locality in the light of his critic's remote acumen. The most artful dodger may look perforce naïf to the international beholder. The views of America, therefore, held by the young Mrs. Meynell, astute observer, are capital reading.

It was an America already dim in our distance, this America of the eighties and even of the nineties, when many of our old and even of our dead things were young. Boston still to the English eye seemed to be the literary focus; "the concentration of New England" appeared to be an extraordinary accident in the favor of American letters. This New England was indisputably to the English perspective of Mrs. Meynell, adopting Arnold's phrase, "the centre,"—the world beyond, apart, afar, and illimitable, uncharted except by the American disciples of Dickens, "the province." "Nowhere else is provincialism so provincial." The benighted *kultur* of these mid-Western novels sounds to us today in the sparkle of her account as strange as it sounded to Mrs. Meynell in the eighties or as *Babbitt* has proved of late to protected sensibilities. Can these really have been "the domestic manners of the Americans"?

"The province" of the West amazed her most in its colonial medley, the compounding of the elementary and the elaborate. Of a Tennessee novel she writes, "Life is insecure among a people accus-

tomed to 'pistol-pockets'; nevertheless, these primitive conditions are contradicted by a passion for remorse and theological despair belonging to an acute civilisation." On a Missouri study she comments, "In this most strange and sincere book we have a certain savage indifference to life coexisting with the habit of stolid and Philistine luxury. . . ." Upon the anomaly of rougher America she never ceased to wonder—"the barbaric trait in combination with the otherwise acutely modern temper of the people."

The "province" is to her an essentially "mournful America." Her reference to remorse and theological despair was not wholly in jest—rather in awful curiosity at her vision of the "dismal community," its "graveyard centre," its "torturing Calvinism," its graceless home life with its surrender of rest. "Henceforth, in reading the delicate fiction of that gay America which has found her own place and date, we shall not escape the remembrance that behind literary New England, and beyond sociable New York, there lies the America of agriculture, a great unhappy people, a world born out of due time." Here is surely an over-serious review of a sour though serious study. We cannot continue today Mrs. Meynell's pity for our friends, the comfortable dwellers in the mid-West, who suggest almost any other temper than theological despair. But we cannot brush the sympathy carelessly aside. The zealots of rural theology are active yet in our

state legislatures, preventing evolution. Our world of to-day is noisy and loud of laugh. But it is salutary to be reminded of that old-fashioned judgment, to remember that this gracious spirit had pity for our world untaught in the natural gaieties which should spring in the climate of a cultured and humane innocence.

Not alone the Tennessee or Missouri of fiction seemed to Mrs. Meynell provincial. For the whole of American life, the "centre" itself, precious New England, she had sometimes the marvel of a wide-eyed child for a wholly new thing. She felt in the characters interpreted a singular inexpressiveness —to her, as we know, a spiritual privation. Affection is "made vulgar by undemonstrativeness," "kindness by reticence"—only religion in this bleak work of Calvinism made "vulgar by candour." The American people she felt to be as a whole even less accustomed to liberty of phrase and act than the English. "The New England man or woman, especially the woman, has an ample vocabulary for the daily labour, the daily worry, but perhaps the narrowest vocabulary among the nations for the profounder things of life."

She reads provincialism between the lines too in the spectacle of "cottage worldliness," the special humours of our local environment. She does not like our "best-parlour emulations." She does not like the parlours themselves in the farmhouses of our countryside, though she should do us the justice

to remember that they were never meant to be used. She does not like in our country-folk "the energetic provincialism," the "distressing household industry," the inability to conceive "a happy day, idle and dinnerless."

"Best-parlour emulation," or a slightly broader equivalent, is Mrs. Meynell's apt turn for the essential American provincialism. Early and unflagging to the end was her amusement at transatlantic snobbery—a trait unbecoming in the prophets and pioneers of a democracy which in the opinion of our English critic Americans much do vaunt but nowhere show. The instinct of social vanity, one may guess, is not only American—is immemorial as the instinct of self-preservation and is like to have a less questionable immortality. But the democrat, if he speaks overmuch of his democracy, is proper game of comedy while he busies himself among the conditions of a new world, to establish ever fresh lines of social cleavage as a substitute for birth distinctions. These are the least humorous devices of human ingenuity. "The desire to despise," says Mrs. Meynell, "is not the least shabby among the unpublished wishes of mankind." But thus, in spite of democratic protestations, the American is discovered giving himself away in literature as well as in the spontaneity of after-dinner confession. Thus, it appears, the "classes" of New England liked to patronise the prairie-dweller: "The American world of the East sea states always treats the

rustic of the West either with a lofty silence or with a marked contempt for a whole class seldom expressed in less equal countries." We may take comfort if we can in the writer's admission of a British snobbery not far different in kind, its veneration for riches metamorphosed to peerages by a distance of generations only. But in America alone does she perceive in full simplicity the desire to be envied, the frank delight in a certified address. Perhaps she never trained her phrase against us with better relish than in the capital mockery of "New Worldliness":

"Human ingenuity found a way to indulge contemptuous passion in the new world. . . . There were always the races though there were no longer the ranks. It was always cheaply possible to hold oneself superior to the Red, the Yellow, the Black, and racial contempt might easily be juggled into class contempt." Even heavier sounds the arraignment amid our racial humiliations of today. We stir uneasily beneath the judgment of this mind, honestly curious, straight in its vision for life's essentials.

In later years, especially the prolific years on the *Pall Mall Gazette,* the American theme was often a handy resource for the extension of a meagre column. The American word, the American "dialect," the American voice, the beauty and health of American women, the alien varieties of American landscape, the considerable varieties in American

skins, all take their turn, and the comments grow increasingly friendly.

From observation surely no longer of American fiction-folk but from American innocents abroad, start the friendly jests at our "liberal ignorance." We are more than common candid, it seems, in our desire for information, jovial and gentle in our curiosity, avid and unabashed—with "a complete lack of the historical emotion." The British may show an equal ignorance, but they "take it gloomily." "These tourists from overseas are the liberally ignorant and it would be hard for liberal learning to match their impartiality, their tolerance, their composure, their candour, their disinterestedness." Here is a jest upon ourselves which we can bear with recognition and with pure amusement.

Always Mrs. Meynell has made us more than amends. For it was the unexpected culture of the finer America which startled her sight and evoked her hearty support. Hence the singleness and comparative originality of her American criticism. The very squib upon the "liberal ignorance" of American Demos on his travels, remembers with respect American education and the special refinement of the American "classes." And while she laughed at the extraordinary "combination of extremes which only provincial America can show," she emphasised still the extreme of educational privilege which the timid American would no longer assert for himself: "An American editor is bred

upon journalism more journalistic than anything we know here, but on a literature more literary (!) than the works of Dickens." And an essay of twenty years later, after her leisurely visit to America, listed America without question at the head of nations in the little minority cherishing the love of poetry.

Wholesome chastiser as she was, Mrs. Meynell championed with lifelong zest American letters. We have found her sharing the impatience of the *National Observer* at our ambitions for a literature gigantic and elementary such as can never be ours, heirs as we are not of some heroic age but of the English centuries. It may be that she underestimated the strength and utterance of the literary backwoodsman. Firmly, in many periodicals, in her early and her late exhortations, she reiterates so far her theme of the *National Observer*—bids us dismiss our hope for a literature of pioneer youth teeming with energy, strong in another return to nature. But Mrs. Meynell meant by her reprimand not a condemnation but a summons to the right adoption of the American bent, a summons both bold and unexpected: "In ripeness and not in rawness," she writes, "consists the excellence of Americans." "The most conspicuous of American characters[1] was to be exquisiteness."

Lowell's we have found to be the only influence

[1] Father Tabb," *Catholic World*, February, 1910, Vol. 90, p. 579.

she acknowledges as directly active upon her own style. And the heartiness of her admiration is a delight to follow. He is the critic "fastidious and alert in many languages," the master of words, who "gave to the language and did not take from it." She has loved best this which she felt to be the most catholic mind among Americans, most congenial as most entirely man of letters.

She continued even headlong in praise of what she felt to be the singular fineness of American work, fineness of inheritance. In her admiration she is never at pains to follow the fashions. From an assorted anonymous collection she picked out easily "The Marshes of Glynn" as the only verses of power or promise. Of Poe she wished none. Into the cult of Walt Whitman she never entered, even when the hostilities of the first shock had been quite over-crowed by the praise. Still in 1910 she pronounced him with valour the poet of mediocrity, "clamorous, not thunderous."[1] She did not in these later days expect her dictum to be popular. She wrote boldly in a style taut and steady. She wrote and survived. But with healing praise she has called us to heed our powers as she has seen them, "the conscious and delicate achievement of American letters." More especially she has known Emerson, the poet, "the one conspicuous greatness of American poetry." She has measured the fine-

[1] "Father Tabb." See above, p. 577.

ness of Father Tabb, "his immediacy," "his melody . . . the several, separate, distinct, discreet abundance of entire brief lyrics."[1]

Mrs. Meynell has felt her American estimate specially justified by "the small and exquisite finish of the American novel." She recognises its excellence, "not in isolated flowers, but in a crop that proves the fulness of the time." She laughs a little, partly in pleasure, at the absorption of the New England school in the affairs of the young girl, like a circle of seraphic doctors at a *sacra conversazione* in contemplation of the Blessed Virgin. But she understands with careful intention their method and their artistry. She respects the local study of the New England writer, "the slow movement and uninterrupted introspection." She has honoured the loving carefulness in the work of Sarah Orne Jewett, "saturated with the essence of New England." She has liked an occasional economy quite to her taste in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Placing Howells always with deference in his right importance, she has spoken more frequently and with more spontaneous delight of the delicacies of the young Henry James.

For she understood the theory if she did not unreservedly commend the results of the American impressionism. She descried its limits and its risks in the preference to observe and appreciate fragments, caring more for the variety of the fragments,

[1] See above, p. 582.

she felt, than for the distinctness of the final result. But she loved the skill of the brilliant young technicians, the modernness of the art—its experimental manner, followed "with an exquisite sensibility, a fastidiousness, an economy, and a truly wonderful adjustment of delicate language to all the complexities and hesitations of thought and feeling."

Occasional reviews of more recent date remain staunch in the old loyalties. For Miss Repplier she has felt a literary sympathy which has been perhaps imperfectly returned. She has honoured with unexpected reserves the art of Mrs. Wharton. She has paid her respects to the American short story. But she has followed with some uneasiness the more recent trend of American fiction, seen from a nearer perspective than of old but understood with a sadder reading of American fashions. Her judgment, troubled by the interpretations of American society, its slipping from traditional moralities, has been grieved most by the assumption of authors that moral anarchy is a settled convention. "Three women of talent," she writes, in a review of short stories by Mrs. Wharton, Mrs. Fisher, Mrs. Gerould, "several kinds of slang, many individual anarchies of conduct. America has sent us for some years nothing more admirable in a rather narrow art, and in a sense nothing more discouraging." But she would not withdraw the verdict of her essay on Father Tabb: "In the intensive modern art of fiction, the close, the tender, the vigilant thought, the

conscious and deliberate style, have been American."

One reads a personal pleasure in the generosity of such praise, her hearty return for a hearty American appreciation. "My greatest friends except one have been Americans all my life," she wrote in the recent letter already quoted. And of late years she has come to love America with a romance sometimes humbling to the patriot.

It is due to our memory of her and to her confidence in us that America should remember her sonnet at the entrance of the United States into the war: "In Honour of America, 1917," written in antithesis to Rossetti's sonnet "On the Refusal of Aid between Nations." It reads like a paean at the compassion of the West, its free entrance into the brotherhood of those who should be heirs through hope of a future redemption. Rossetti's sonnet we remember as the utterance of disillusion, pointing to an old world which falls asunder, being old, while the nations of men stand, each on its separate plot of ground, saying in dogged denial of life, "I am I, thou art thou." Rossetti's seems to many of us to-day a sadly true poem. We are grown quite accustomed to the refusal of aid between nations. But it is salutary to remember in these baffled days the message from across the seas to the spirit of our country's youth—from the aging woman who had lived far beyond the common years of disillusion:

Not that the earth is changing, O my God!
Not that her brave democracies take heart
To share, to rule her treasure, to impart
The wine to those who long the wine-press trod.

* * * * *

But because living men for dying man
Go to a million deaths to deal one blow,
And justice speaks one great compassionate tongue;
And nation unto nation calls, "One clan
We succourers are, one tribe!" By this we know
Our earth holds confident, steadfast, being young.

## CHAPTER IX

### The Journalist of Woman

Mrs. Meynell came to her first fame amid the fashion of laughter at the lady journalist. The masculine jibe at the woman has been a convention for more centuries than one dares to count. But the puttering of the public conscience at the end of the century over the encroachments and especially the literary encroachments of woman, recall a world modern, it is true, but already curiously obsolete. In a series of the *Daily Telegraph* Mr. Robert Buchanan and Mrs. Lynn Linton could gravely argue in defence of opposed purities, old and new. Mrs. Crawford could venture in the *Contemporary Review* to expose herself in explanation of woman's aptness to journalism because of her "rock of principle," her "great soul," and—slight touch of sense—her "native pliancy." And the "knight-errants, the social purists," were hot in recoil from a suspected feminine nastiness. "There is proof abundant that women when they embrace journalism, renounce the scruples which hold in check all but the very newest of the trade." Thus the *National Observer* in support of Frederic Harrison. The *National Observer* suggested out of its own irony a special

feminine aptitude for the work in the "native impudence of woman, which makes her, it is held, the best sort of intermediary in the market." Of many lady journalists, however, and of one in particular, we know, the *National Observer* was glad enough to get the service.

Mrs. Meynell, accepted of fame as we have seen, was never judged on the theory of the masculine contempt. But one effect her womanhood had upon the habits of her writing. By a natural editorial selection she was more frequently chosen to cope with the concerns of ladies old and new.

We have seen her literary beginnings in the reviews of *Daniel Deronda;* reference to late volumes of the *Dublin Review* shows her to have been the cordial critic of women authors until the end. With the *Pall Mall Gazette,* as we have noted, her most considerable labour was for women on the "Autolycus" column. Her series of slighter sketches in the *Daily Chronicle* of 1896 was entitled "A Woman's Fancies." But the studies of Mrs. Meynell, hasty or deliberate, could never confine themselves long to fancy.

She tried, to be sure. And she is, according to her trademark, a "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles." Amazing details of cookery and trimmings, of street bunting and household decoration, stray into her columns—with special appeals early and late for a better draping of "the human scenery," in man and woman. There is gaiety in her "Reproach in Cos-

tume." In an earlier article there is pleasant toying with the memory of more intrepid fashions (with which the more intrepid twentieth century has more than caught up): "There was a valour about the powder, the red heel, the tempestuous petticoat, for which we have no spirit. Our greatest audacities to-day are trivial and dull compared with the enterprise of the gentlest Gainsborough." Sometimes Mrs. Meynell's womanish wit plays at literary fancy, as in her bright study of seventeenth-century song, "The Lady of the Lyrics": "to be called the Lady of the Stanzas, so strictly does she go to measure. When she is quarrelsome, it is but fuguishness; when she dances, she does it by a canon." Most sweet trifling! But here, as elsewhere, it was hard for Mrs. Meynell to trifle. Free, in the *Pall Mall Gazette* at least, to interpret her theme of *Woman's Wares* as she chose, she turned by choice from favour and prettiness to the serious study of woman and her ways.

In her humane bookishness she became the defender of ladies long dead with whom history has harshly or grotesquely dealt, deploring the tendency of the retrospective critic to become picturesque. Equally brutal she held the carelessness of sentiment or of smartness. In conversation as in recent review she would recover old indignations at our neglectful contempt for Harriet Shelley and her inconspicuous sufferings, while we palliate, "in honour for the divine poet," the selfish inconsequence of the Shelley

flights. In a column of the *Pall Mall Gazette* she turns in like anger to a generous recollection of Lady Byron, "a child of twenty" at the time of her nation-wide notoriety. She writes hotly, angry with the public sentiment which at the expense of woman overlooks cruelty in man if he is notable or delightful or possessed of the little poetry which covers a multitude of sins.

She instituted organised "proceedings" in honour of diverse eighteenth-century ladies misrepresented by the emphasis of some critic's mood, which has perhaps modified the pure historical estimate. Here is friendly Mrs. Thrale, like the good, unaffected soul she was, delivered from the test of the decorous proprieties, inviting in her dash and impulse, "refusing to grieve at those (her guests), who in memoirs, diaries, and biography, had confused friendship and had worked the final wrong of spoiling the past—her anger mingled not only with good spirits but with sweet humour." Here is Mrs. Johnson, butt of Garrick's thoughtless ridicule perpetuated by the black and white of Macaulay—the woman who could recognise beneath the repulsive exterior of the great Doctor, "in spite of first sight," a power of sense and intelligence never before met. And here is Mrs. Dingley, the D. of Swift's M.D., the composite woman to whom he wrote the tender, playful letters of the "little language," slighted by the historian intent upon extracting the most sentimental reading of the Stella history. And here is

Prue, Steele's wife, maligned, as Mrs. Meynell conceived, by a side-shaft of the Thackeray satire, introduced in the spacious historical reconstruction of *Henry Esmond,* and rather merrily interpreted. Against all inconsiderate and scoffing surmise the gentle journalist throws a Niobe arm around the innocent or the uncondemned.

More entertaining perhaps are the women less known, hunted up in their dusty old memoirs, and awakened to flickers of real life. "Her Serene Highness" is here, Elizabeth Buckley, later to be Margravine of Auspach, who shocked her insular country by her innocent freedom when, having left for good reason her first husband, "she went abroad presuming on her own integrity in a spirit of gaiety which was considered inappropriate. She confesses that she delighted Europe."

Equally dramatic is the "Invasion of England" by a masterful Scotch lady with her incidental husband, carrying her conquests like Alexander and Bonnie Leslie, entering into colloquies upon religion with such as she could engage, particularly severe on one benighted woman "who did not know that there was any other method of worship than her own." "She rebuked her with the higher ignorance."

No less distinguished was May Moses, R.A. (chosen no doubt that she might recall to thoughtful readers the former eligibility of women to the Royal Academy). Her greatest triumph, a right eighteenth century achievement, she recorded to the un-

quenchable delight of Mrs. Meynell, in italics. She had succeeded in *"painting real wheat so as to make it seem stucco wheat."*

There are besides the gentle hearts remembered for pity and for reverence which the casual traveller cannot afford. So recur the sufferings of Arabella Stuart, imprisoned by James I for her marriage of love to which he had at one time consented. She was a spirit "generous, worthy of liberty, forced to grief," exposed in the piteous abjectness of her letters to "the most merciful king that ever was," who toyed with her poetry, and "thrust her expanded mind into the inner darkness."

With honour beyond pity is written the study of Henriette Renan, "The Sister of the Seminarist." Here was a soul singularly lovely to such as Mrs. Meynell in the terrible completeness of its renunciations. She "made sacrifice of all unsuspected and suspected capacities," yielding for the sake of the brother whom her poverty succoured the very singleness of her personal self: "Solitude is for few, but singleness is for almost all, and she rejects it."

The characteristic subject of Mrs. Meynell was, of course, the woman of letters. And the criticism of the feminine achievement forms a large fraction of her strictly literary writing. The muster-roll of feminine notabilities is long, and memorable, if only for the industry which it represents. Strictly literary criticism is here deferred until another chapter. But Mrs. Meynell had often for her

sisters in the fellowship of letters a criticism not "literary," a feminine knowingness as enlightening as the most astute appraisal. For the moment it is better to guess what it would feel like to be Mary Wollstonecraft or Jane Austen than to know infallibly the value of each.

Generous without taint of squeamishness is her study of Mary Wollstonecraft in a *Spectator* essay of 1879. Here in firm, unconventional handling, the theoretic rebel against the social order is treated in a temper of confidence rather than reserve. Mary Wollstonecraft is shown in her headlong divergence from the marriage law, "as clean of thought as a nun," "superior to the woman who outlives a series of husbands or to the prude who has one standard for women and another for men." Her intellectual competence too is recognised: "The orderliness of her thought is indeed masculine." She is understood and forgiven in all things because she loved much—"she who took her life so greatly to heart," whose "reason was quick in every act," "with philanthropy toward the race, with charity toward the individual, with religious love," in lifelong will to teach the equality of the sexes in religion, in intellect, in responsibility, in duty.

Amusing, rather, is Mrs. Meynell's half-confessed dislike toward Madame Roland, offensive only in her entire adequacy of expression for all occasions. One is amused at Mrs. Meynell's reversal of her usual standard, for we have found her the priestess

of expression: "We should be glad to admire that heroic figure if that heroic figure would but cease to talk."

Keen in its tracing of secret sins and secret exquisiteness is the study of Lucy Hutchinson. Here is revealed a life and language existing to the honour of another, given with a magnificence which a reserve of Puritanic vanities could not defile. The faults and over-gravities are raised to a higher power by the spiritual levitation of a possessing love. The Puritan lady is sparingly but faithfully revealed in "her power, her integrity, her tenderness, her pomp, . . . her diction." This last, "the memorable vintage of her language," is, by Mrs. Meynell's test, right seventeenth-century. And she knows no higher praise.

Best of all perhaps is the personal Jane Austen. The critics, still sore over the faint praise of the "Classic Novelist," should turn back to the friendly columns dedicated in friendship to the friendly Jane, circumscribed in environment which would be prison to a mind capable of imprisonment. "Her genius was sufficient unto itself, and it needed all its powers." In its minute centre of family and village, the mind of Jane Austen abode and found for itself abundance, "with its incommunicable humour, its unwearied and unshared vigilance." With honour as for a moral triumph a column of 25 July, 1895, recalls a book of charades kept by Jane Austen's family, poor little charades pursued perhaps with

gay resignation. Jane Austen could probably do without our sympathy, but we give it none the less for the long provincial evenings of the charades with the fussy provincial doings and the fussy provincial thoughts, and that pleasant figure sitting in the midst, "making itself ample amends," with its all sufficient good-nature and its more than sufficient wit.

In this comradeship with the elder ladies of letters we perceive a touch of the elder taste in our modern Mrs. Meynell. Her choice is for woman lovely, in her graceful and gracious functions; and in the courteous world of her fancy, of a finer urbanity than our own, woman would rightly rule as *arbiter elegantiarum*. "Manners maketh Man" is the title of a column already quoted; and manners, she tells us here, are the peculiar and appropriate care of woman. She is not above anxieties for the smaller graces, is solicitous, and well as a modern she may be, for the quality of woman's voice. She looks to woman for a tutelary interest in speech, for an efficient censorship of language; for she remembers the Frenchwoman's appreciable influence upon the phrase. In her care that woman, as she grows to a more various freedom, may still retain the gentler virtues, Mrs. Meynell even hears without anger the imputation that women lack humour. "If humour is not young, neither, we have been often told, is it feminine; and though the saying may be a hard one for women to bear, there is some compensation in the fact that the aloofness from humour that is laid

to their charge has kept their laughter light. . . . A feminine laugh too has to be decorative, and so should be the laugh of gaiety rather than of humour." We have gone far indeed from the days of "decorative" woman, of the woman whose laughter is like a child's.

Mrs. Meynell's ideal for woman is incompletely judged without recollection of her unusual book, *Mary the Mother of Jesus*. It is a work of eclectic material, partly art criticism and history, partly a commentary on poetry, partly a meditative reverie, but throughout a revelation to the Protestant mind of what can be the significant value to the Catholic in the contemplation of Mary. Unpretentious, defective sometimes in historical scholarship when it goes outside the field of art—the book has special value as modern variant of the ancient meditation,—upon the woman who meant to the mind popular or cultured the vision of the immaculate ideal. Here is, in language comprehensible to us all, the veneration which the world has given to her who represented in its worship pure woman, mother of God, to whom were ascribed the mysteries predestined for womanhood and maternity. "Sanctity, modesty, honour, chastity were the glories of her meek domination; by virtue of mercy and humility she reigned in Heaven." Mrs. Meynell has asserted, and with some injustice of reading, a failure in the English imagination with the passing of Mary from the common English ken, and a loss of respect for

woman in a world narrowed to Puritanism. Shakespeare alone, she would say, by the divinity of genius, achieved in creation of his women "an immaculate conception," "of absolute sanctity and innocence intact." And a loss unparalleled Mrs. Meynell has ascribed to the modern world, since the honours of Mary have ceased to be divided and distributed among women: *"Virgo potens, Virgo prudentissima, Virgo veneranda, Virgo praedicanda, Mater admirabilis, Mater intemerata, Vas honorabile, Foederis arca, Speculum justiciae!"* Old-fashioned phrases indeed!

Less alien to our modern Protestant habit is Mrs. Meynell's choice of the stirring prophecy from Holy Writ, which the daring aspiration of the ultra-Feminist might well adopt as a watchword: "Spoken by no prophet but from the mouth of the Creator is the prophecy which announced and consecrated woman as the opponent of moral evil—in condemnation of the Devil, the mystical representative of moral evil upon earth: 'I will put enmity between thee and the woman'." It is for a modern womanhood, intrepid, able to bruise the head of the modern serpent, that Mrs. Meynell has worked. Interior sanctity may not be achieved by act of Parliament; effectual outward justice, still imperfectly realised, may be a proper aim of effort.

Mrs. Meynell, therefore, has written capitally as woman's defender in the practical struggle of the sexes. She has repulsed with dangerous suavity the

conventional sneer of man at woman's intellect. With steady good-nature she jeered at the cheap ascription of a special feminine psychology developed in a line of separate heredity, as if the woman derived only from the mother. She recognised no sexual distinctions of syntax, returning the jest at feminine frailties by a converse reference to "masculine grammar." She accepted all implications of strictly feminine stupidity by slyly implying a masculine correlative: "It has been proved that her ignorance is different from that of a man, that her inferiority has a dissimilar bloom to that which invests his, that her incapacity has a futility unlike the futility achieved by man." To Miss Martineau, whom she delighted to abhor, she allowed the "masculine understanding," according to the compliment currently applied: "So much is to her credit. The question is perhaps how much returns to the masculine understanding."

She had as ardently at heart as her friend George Meredith the woman of the future. At sentimental efforts to raise the feminine status she would wisely laugh, would parry well-meant efforts of a Society for the Promotion of Employment of Women, to get the labouring woman home to tea before she had managed to earn the bread to cut. She would quietly propound the problems of the economic inequality; would suggest the right of the efficient woman labourer to equal pay with man for equal work. Even in her sympathetic study of the "Poor Sisters

of Nazareth" she would pause to suggest the knack for teamwork developed in the merciful activities of the nuns. In recognition of a common principle she would point the Frenchwoman's right to a revision of the marriage law. She admitted the frequent necessity for an independent calling of the married woman, and welcomed discussion of the problem. She proposed a legal provision of "dowers for poor brides." And the justice of "daughters' portions," provision for the independent dignity of the wife, was the subject of her most notable contribution to the *Daily Chronicle*. Repeatedly and without shrillness she implied the essential dignity of womanhood before the law and in the wrestle for bread. With all her hatred of movements, we know that she joined one—the suffrage.

Her thought had weight because she wrote urbanely. She was a moderate and therefore a most effectual champion. She would just hint a flaw, just hesitate a nonsense in the logic of the masculine condescension. It was a quiet voice, though a "treble note," never raised, a voice which defended the sense of women—with sense. Her work was to bring to notice, always without forcing, usually without comment, new or corrected standards. She made always plain her faith in woman's sanity and power; but pursued a method of penetration extraordinarily peaceful for a Feminist, a quiet iteration aided by suggestion so lightly touched that sometimes the column must needs be scanned for a clue to the writer's opinion. But she has her way with us. We

must consider perforce without prejudice the problems of modern woman.

She writes wisely furthermore, for she writes without blindness, well aware in her honest spirit of feminine limitation. She has no temptation to blink the differences between masculine and feminine psychology. She does her quiet best without claim of uniformity for the sexes, insisting rather upon their separate and special value. She detects too a provincialism in the temper of the average woman: "The greater number of hobbies bear a side-saddle." She finds in woman's conscience "a weak sense of abstract justice or wrong," admits in her judgment too personal an absorption: "This is indeed the universal need of women—that they cannot take a more large and generous heart." She confesses in woman's weakness a timorous search for some little place of insignificant rest on any accessible point of "stable equilibrium," far indeed from "the difficult peace of suspense." She knows the potential rashness in the dangerous poignancy of woman's nature. She dreads here the "vehement voice." Serenity, she implies, never speaks in excitement, excitement which betrays a fundamental dearth: "Only the strong can be altogether gentle." "We would rather hear a man's pianissimo upon any instrument, than a woman's." One understands her active dislike for vivacity of manner. It is danger signal of concealed weakness; its absence in the work of man or woman is the highest title to praise.

Mrs. Meynell writes her strictures without con-

tempt. Woman is but recalled in gentle admonition to remember herself. Let her thought and act be steady, conscious of reserve which is the base of all efficiency. She has written in prose, in a column of the *Catholic Suffragist,* the message of "A Father of Women." "New duties demanding new endurances and exacting a response to new tests, have set them (women) to thinking of themselves not only as daughters of women but as daughters of men."

Her intrepidity was no war-time product. Her admonition to her fellow-women has never faltered, nor her quiet demand upon the respect of men. It was like herself years before, and probably like no other woman, certainly no other poet on earth, to turn at the end of a poem on Saint Catherine of Siena to demand of man "the service of his knee," and to suggest from man in the same stanza the yielding of the "Vote."

The world is modern, and Mrs. Meynell, better than most, has advocated acceptance of the years and submission to their changes. But still she could take, if she would, from the medieval phrases sufficient epithet for the new woman to come. She will assuredly be *"Virgo potens";* she may be again—who knows?—*"Virgo veneranda."*

One understands Mrs. Meynell's distaste for distinctions dealing with "feminine poetry," "feminine style," feminine subject. Mistress Quickly was not the first or last of her sex who has hated to be called a woman and has replied, "I defy thee." But

Mrs. Meynell's refusal of the name signified only her faith in its better meaning. She was impatient for the time when the woman artist should be considered only on her own merits: "As a rule woman is best praised, if the truth must be told, without the word feminine, so long as it is a word of half-reproach or of negation." She hoped in confidence for a day when the word feminine should be used in praise, "not as a grace but as a force, not as the negation of something else, but as a positive thing, and therefore an energy standing sufficiently alone."

Such an aspiration has been perhaps achieved. And to quote the following passage seems already old-fashioned. But despite her unwillingness to be called a woman, Mrs. Meynell must have liked and would wish preserved the praise of her in *T. P.'s Weekly,* 19 June, 1914: "Women have of course written in prose before; but when they have been noticeable as stylists, it has been as men prose writers have been noticeable as stylists; at other times they have shown only one side of a woman's nature—generally the easiest, the emotional. But we have never had a woman stylist before Mrs. Meynell. In her essays you realize that a woman may have ideas as well as feelings, reasons as well as intuitions—and that these may be expressed in a prose as sensitive and as close knit as that of the most exacting male prosodist. And to its further distinction may be added the permanence of its femininity."

# CHAPTER X

## Childhood

"The study of children," says a representative press note of 1897, "has lately become a vogue in literature." So used are we to-day to the vogue that reference to its beginnings strikes a note of antiquity already suspected of the nineties. Max Beerbohm, elegant in jeers, has, in "A Cloud of Pinafores,"[1] laughed at the ubiquity and dominance of the child in the fashionable world of the time: "The wooden wicket which even in my day barred the topmost of the stairs, has been taken off its hinges, and the jewels roll down into Cornelia's drawing-room at will." Mr. Wilfrid Meynell himself, in an essay on *The Child Set in the Midst,* makes the symbol of the year, 1894, the popular picture by T. C. Gotch, "The Child Enthroned."

Max Beerbohm, as certain sparkles of his malice bear witness, had reference in part to the very essays on childhood which Mrs. Meynell was producing with exceptional abundance and rapidity. In the *Pall Mall Gazette* they frequently furnished "Autolycus" of 1894 and sporadically long thereafter. They ran weekly in the short-lived periodical, the *Album,* throughout a large part of the year 1895.

[1] *More.* P. 189. London, John Lane, 1899 (New York, Dodd, Mead).

A less important series appeared in the American *Delineator* of 1898. They are preserved to-day in two little books, *The Children,* and *Childhood,* combined, especially *Childhood,* more loosely than in Mrs. Meynell's usual reprint, with more reshuffling of material scattered in early essays or informal scraps. A few—and these of the best—were included in *Ceres' Runaway* and preserved in the collected edition. A pleasant contribution of somewhat later date is her *Children of the Old Masters,* an informal comment by the critic of trained sight upon the ancient theme in painting through five centuries of changing view and vision. Mrs. Meynell's whole study of childhood is, one concludes, a considerable proportion among her essays. The *Pall Mall Gazette,* proud of its sponsorship, made for her a considerable claim: "It may almost be said of Mrs. Meynell that she has newly created the child in literature. The jest is stale enough. Hers may almost be called the 'new child'." It is best not to accept the superlative assertion of the *Pall Mall.* But if there is in any sense a "new child" in the nineties, he is the child as Mrs. Meynell perceives him.

He is intended to be "the real child," not—so to say—touched up. And so far he is new indeed; for literature has usually known the child mind heightened or colored or feelingly considered in adult regard. There has been the infrequent Shakespeare boy, of precocious charm, apt in inno-

cent wit, at once appealing and unlikely. There was the model prig or rascal of the moral tale, conveniently good or bad with a simplicity beyond the reach of baffling fact. There was the little noble savage fitted to revolutionary taste, charging about with his natural vigours and inborn rectitude in the china shop of social convention. The namby-pamby variety we have always with us, the "timely blossom, infant fair," like "Miss Charlotte Pulteney in her mother's arms." The motif of childhood innocence, of course, has been a sweet and glad plaything for poetry in its purest hours, in art as diverse as that of Blake, of Christina Rossetti, of Swinburne, of Francis Thompson. Most frequent, in fiction at least, is the child created to constrain our pity, foreordained to patience and slaughter that our tenderness may indulge itself without confine. Such were always favourites even as long ago as the nice little Isaacs of the miracle plays. There has been besides the more lugubrious and subtle pathos recognised by Mrs. Meynell—pity for "the child predestined not to die but to live":

> Alas! regardless of their doom
> The little victims play!

The novelists, of course, from time to time have known how to give us excellent children. Many a capital *enfance,* of a Tom Jones or of a Maggie Tulliver, has prepared the way before the theme. For George Eliot's knowledge of the child Mrs.

Meynell had the greatest honour. And perhaps nobody will ever make a better little girl than Maggie. But Maggie, immortal child, was the start of Maggie the tragic woman, projected and foretold, to whose anguish we look forward from the first stormy shake of the dark forelock and the first incursion of the red-hot words. Her childhood, as George Eliot conceived it, was the evident beginning of her thwarted life. And thus it has been with the child of the novelist. He may not stay. He must hurry along to be the father of the man.

The "new child" of the nineties was coming to be a subject sufficient unto himself, with a psychology and dignity of his own. The fashion cared little to study the future in the instant, to seek some far culmination of life for which the present was fondly supposed to be made. It cared rather for childhood essential, for the gradual, slow unfolding. The press, at least, suspected something new in all this. "Not so very long ago," wrote the *Academy* of 2 December, 1896, "the idea of taking the child's mind seriously would have been laughed at."

To take it seriously was to take it simply, just to see it alone, "when it is in no way displayed." The quotation is from the criticism of Mrs. Meynell in *Merry England* upon Stevenson. And to Stevenson, if to anyone, she would have ascribed the new creature. She greeted for truth in a *Child's Garden of Verses* the "little deliberations moving fitfully." Here as well as in the adventuring stories of the

adventuring treasure-seekers, she found "the simplicity of character and enterprise in day-dreaming of the real boy." In the tradition of the Stevenson child, we may venture to think, lived and functioned the segregated intelligences of the immortal Harold and Edward and Selina of Kenneth Graham. In this tradition avowedly is the authentic *Make Believe* of H. D. Lowry. Of the same kin surely is the genial barbarian, "The Boy" of Andrew Lang's friendly recollection and amazement. Of the same blood come the innumerable company of "real" children who have filed by in procession ever since, led by their knowing friends who have known enough to be respectful. Most courteous in some ways, most void of offensive "condescension" have been the unpretentious essays of Mrs. Meynell. She has waited in patience upon the opening consciousness of these young spirits, without forcing, without impertinence.

She drew, of course, a little from her early memories. There was the conversational deadlock with little Genoese callers, when Genoese refused to flow in the presence of elders. There was the militaristic triumph of the two little English girls who swept before them all the child population of the Italian hillside in the threatening swoop of their descent. Unmistakably her own was the sensitiveness of the little girl, consoled for the sorrows of ants inadvertently crushed to a hasty end, by the supposition that "as size and space differed between very large beings

(herself for example) and very small, so might time, and a minute of her life might be a full year of successions and feelings and happenings to the ants." Her own childhood gave the clue.[1] But for the most part she speaks from the one remove or the less than one remove of motherhood.

"This is the woman turning to solitude with her own child," she wrote once of Mrs. Piatt, an American poet whose work she specially admired. And we may adopt the words for herself. Hers too was a poignancy, a sympathy "finely edged." But Mrs. Meynell went joyously about her observations, without "pathos," recording, as she said of E. N. Shaw, "the gayest little facts." An unreprinted sketch, "The Nursery," is full of memories—of long minutes wasted in choice among "confectionary plums," of special signs without words understood between mother and nursery, of bread toasted before the nursery fire in defiance of kitchen authorities. She is in the secrets. One remembers Mr. Meynell's dedication of *The Child Set in the Midst*—"To the Mother of Sebastian, Monica, Everard, Madeline, Viola, Vivian, Olive, and Francis."

She has watched the slow beginnings of the personal life. She has heeded "the hasty, huddled outcry" with which the babe of man first catches the breath in this terrestrial air; she has caught the first intentional sound meant to be communicative and ex-

[1] *Childhood.* P. 29.

pressive. She has seen the first uncertain sketch of a smile, "private, dry." She has recognised the immemorial jealousy in its beginning when the child stretches his body across a plate of discarded food to keep it from the kitten. She has smiled to remember the need at the start of childish friendships for protecting barriers, return "to the space and distance of birds." She has admired "the fine courage" in the adventure of speech, the frequent genius of the "inexpert and invaluable word," coined under the impression that elders habitually improvise their vocabulary. She has liked the child's gravity about his toys, as he putters at "all sorts of close industries, breathing hard over choppings and poundings."

She has liked him as well in his less sober vein, has understood "the desperate joys of disobedience." There is in "The Childish Town" of the summer English village, and in the more delightful "Under the Early Stars," the very "punctual wildness" of the twilight hour, the "jolt" of spirit to the children as to the kitten. "What remembrance does this imply of the hunt, what of the predatory dark? . . . Something, something is done for freedom under the early stars."

With closer inspiration Mrs. Meynell has recaptured for us the greater intensity of the child's experience within the narrow range, his acuteness of sense and freshness of perception quite beyond our adult powers of recovery. For the child, as he passes "near the ground," lifting his eyes but to

follow the flight of a bird, is aware of a liveliness forgotten behind decades of our memory. He has known long ago the keener odors, the swarming sights, "the spiritual-rustic scent of small daisies," the "green twilight of grass blades."[1] Mrs. Meynell has accounted thus for the child's quick aversions in the world of folk, his horror for a face too deeply lined or held too near, for the well-nigh immortal bonnets of his relatives. She accounts thus for the innumerable events of the unimaginable hour, before the time-machine begins to quicken its pace. In the sense for time indeed does Mrs. Meynell find childhood's best gift to the imagination of later years. Whatsoever things are among our first lessons "are ancient as the stars, earlier than time."

With a delicacy which will not press or handle, Mrs. Meynell respects the strange and baffling separateness of the child mind from our own alien habits, revealed now and then in some startling childish answer. From their distance we catch hints of a separate and special code of signals imperceptible to experienced minds. Such we get in the amusing sketch about "The Stranger's Children,"[2] in which a group of little folk watched constantly in their far-off windows from the windows of home, are pronounced by the home children to be indubitably proud: "They black their boots at us!"—nice recall of an ancient and famous biting of the thumbs. And

[1] *Ibid.* P. 54.
[2] *Ibid.* P. 5.

nobody has done better than Mrs. Meynell for the inscrutable age of twelve as she shows it in "The Boy."

Deepest perhaps is her compassionate understanding for the young will untaught in the uses of necessity. "That simple fact about the impossibility of eating your cake and having it too, is of itself a disability to which the liberal child cannot accustom himself but by time." Wistful in a beautiful comprehension is her watch over "the child of tumult," the gusty spirit not yet prepared for its own danger, for the rending passions, and the devastations of a penitence "which justice herself would be glad to spare him." It is a tragedy felt to be no less a tragedy because it is suffered by a spirit still unable to bear it.

Mrs. Meynell has ample time besides for the unready wit in a world too quick for its laggard mental pace. For the child mind, she tells us, does not, like its flitting body, take trips for the third part of a minute. It moves halting, making what unwieldy way it can amid the intricacies of life and a still more intricate grammar. "Among all the sights proposed for our instruction, that which befitted us best was an eclipse of the moon done at leisure. In good time we found the moon in the sky; in good time the eclipse set in and made reasonable progress. We kept up with everything."

Eagerly too she defends the child from the adult zeal to amuse him. He may be more easily tickled

than ourselves by the sudden startle of incongruity, as we guess now and then by the accidental meeting of his humour and ours. But he is not, Mrs. Meynell insists, essentially humorous. Why must we then be always busy "to offer humour to those by no means trivial eyes?" Better for children of erect minds even the *Cautionary Verses* of the Misses Taylor or the symmetrical morals of Mrs. Fenwick, which at least are free from levity and unresting sparkle. Even the pig of picture-books has lost, we are told, the quality for which he is dear to children —piggishness. "There was a pig, I remember, in Walter Crane's *Babies' Opera.* But I think he did not wear glasses or carry things in his hoofs."

Her witness is valuable to the homely common sense of children, ignored in the popular insistence upon their fancy. For the child is a creature of the earth, earthy. So has he been since longer ago than the year when Blake piped to the child upon a cloud who asked for no song about a cloud but only about a lamb. Mrs. Meynell, at any rate, acquainted with childhood of genius, cared little to cherish the illusion of its poetic credulities. Characteristic is her protest at the pretty game played by the audience at the end of *Peter Pan,* wherein the children are called upon to declare their faith in fairies—"a game of men and women at the expense of children."[1] For children, Mrs. Meynell is bold to assert, do not spend their time, as Francis Thompson says, listen-

[1] *Childhood.* P. 34.

ing to elves. They are tirelessly fertile in pretence to be sure. But they know what they are doing. The children of her knowledge are not friends of fancy but friends of fact.

Childhood remains to her, none the less, a mystery visited by revelation. Here is another witness, valid because unsentimental, to the inner sight of privileged children. Mrs. Meynell's kinship is with Traherne, who celebrated in simplicity and in philosophy a childhood of spiritual powers. "My essence was capacity"—this was the beginning and the end of his intimations. She remembers too with Wordsworth the exultation of the child's soul over "beauty at its daybreak in the dark," recalling the childish sense for hillsides in wild flower, calm summer seas, and "fields unprofaned." She derives from the boy Dante poetry's highest reach of spiritual love. "Therefore, be satisfied," she bids the early dead of modern battle:

> Long life is in your treasury ere you fall;
> Yes, and first love, like Dante's. O a bride
> Forever mystical!
>
> Irrevocable good,—
>
> * * * * * * * * * * *
>
> Your childhood was; there Space, there Multitude,
> There dwelt Antiquity.

But the children of Mrs. Meynell are not oppressed by the weight of their immortalities. Theirs is a reality of flesh. And she finds them the more exquisite as the more real. She has loved the special

beauty of finish in the young child, "that surprise of perfection," the "exceeding fineness" of the eyebrows, a "hardly perceptible down" to soften the lines, a bloom soon to disappear—and in the still early years "their tenderness, their colour, their fulness which is like that of a tight rose or of a thick grape." And against the old tradition of the child as diminished man, she sets in modern wise the frolic beauty in the real childish proportions, as Reynolds saw them: "the irregularity of profile which is in fact a child's regularity, the homeliness of the large head which is the child's elegance, the short lines which are his grace, the smile which is not derisive but touches that feeling as the frolic movement of the child touches the grotesque." Early and late, too, she throws her gauge against Raphael "who imposed the formula of grace upon all Europe."[1] The child of grace, at least, is nowhere found in the pages of Mrs. Meynell. Her child, the true child, is never posed at all. He stands upon both feet, in "stable equilibrium," taking what grip he can of the earth.

[1] *The Children of the Old Masters.* P. 67.

# CHAPTER XI

## Descriptive Impressionism

The descriptive writings of Mrs. Meynell form that part of her work best known to the running reader. One is surprised to discover that of her complete product they represent but a slight proportion—so special is their quality and so considerable their number in the reprinted essays. Here, we may be sure, is something for which she singularly cared. She loved these memories of the wayfaring vision, these gleams of lights and waters.

Perhaps they achieve no less than the vindication of that old-fashioned thing, word-painting as an art form. The theorizers like to remind us that the days of descriptive writing are over. Description belongs, they say, to a generation long gone, and has no modern *raison d'être.* It may be still legitimate as an humble hand-maid of fiction, trained to suppression in an inconspicuous service. Indeed, we cannot get along without it there. But it must be seen and not heard. Alone, they assure us, it is a dead thing. We acquiesce—and presently murmur, "But yet it moves occasionally." That evidence is our only answer to the rhetoricians. We shall not, at least, find it any more alive than in the pages of Mrs. Meynell.

It is the art of a fine strung impressionism, as Mrs. Meynell understood the meaning of that unhappy word. We get her theory in a chance comment upon her sister, Lady Butler, "She has, though not the method, yet the spirit of impressionism, in her instant and insistent grasp of the passing fact." She gives us more, therefore, than is commonly achieved of real sensation, with a memory caring far more for sense than for sentiment. She takes no risk of being pathetically fallacious in the perilous modern way. She gives no familiar confidence in the spirit of a Jefferies, brooding in its own warmth on the nest of personal delight. Nor has she the half-scientific, half-friendly comradeship of a Burroughs, with mouse and mole, all friendly beasts and friendly things, apple, porcupine, or sunset. She is, as far as an artist can be and still dominate his material, deliberately and honestly objective.

But Mrs. Meynell is felt always a presence in control. Each sketch is the product of alertness. Here is no mere drift of unrelated details, but a sure intention, able to heighten without the intrusion of a too intimate emotion.

We are far indeed from what Mrs. Meynell calls "the extreme explicatory labour"[1] of a Ruskin, his over-courteous attention to the limitations of his reader lest we miss the entirety of his vision. Hers is the selectiveness of the fine impressionism—for

[1] *John Ruskin.* P. 8.

in speaking of Mrs. Meynell one cannot without pedantry avoid the habit which she always deplored and frequently followed, of speaking of one art in terms of another. The friend and critic of painters, she might have been, had she chosen, one cannot doubt, herself a painter of distinction—so extraordinary was her gift to perceive what she saw, to catch as swiftly as sunshine its salient places, to detect only with the emphasis of the perceiving eye, *"la vie surprise."* Her little sketches are all tipped with "instancy," the higher detection. Sentences taken almost at random have the effect of light suddenly shaken upon shady places.

Here is the fine vitality of a most rich sensation. One gets from her words a poignancy as of an incorrupt noble savagery seldom indeed to be recaptured among our urban habits and satieties. Or rather perhaps we might say that she has managed to preserve the stringency of the child's experience which we faintly remember as now torment and now delight. And Mrs. Meynell, who has derived from childhood recollection our whole sense for the unimaginable touch of time, might also have noted how many of our mature joys of sense are memories of quickened moments in a child's experience. Whatever the impression, her words prick a dulled memory for the actual pulse of things.

She has frank pleasure in the tactile, the healthy vitalities of sensitive hands, and the feel of flowers through the bare feet of children. There is the tug

of the muscle realised in the bright hours along the tow-path. There is the elastic resistance of the line, only too slight, and its "sensible thrill, as the ranks of riverside plants with their small summit flowers of violet pink are swept aside like a long breaker of flourishing green."

"The colour of life" is her essential phrase. And she meant it literally—the colour of the "unpublished blood," of the human body and flesh. It is deep under the Sicilian day. "Under the misty blue of the English zenith and the warm grey of the London horizon, it is delicately flushed as the paler wild roses, out to their utmost, flat as stars, in the hedges of the end of June." It is perfect in the open air, at the apotheosis of the London gamin bathed in the Serpentine, when he has "sloughed off the hues of dust and fog and goes shouting to complete the landscape," "invested with the sun."

Hers is a world of colour unafraid when she cares to use it. A bright series in the *Pall Mall Gazette* carries the titles, "Blue," "Green," "Red," "White," "Yellow." And the colours of her world are warm "with the hint of gold that is in all fine colour." There is brown, defended in its existence and its beauty against Ruskin, "colour of earth, of the darker passages in the wall-flower, of the basalt of the North Sea, of the rocks in Sicilian bays, and of Sicilian amber, where it shifts and circles in light." The best red is the berry, "to the taste of the Japanese whose red is a living colour light and soft as

wandering gold makes all the colour it lurks within." Even her white is whitest at the edge of the foam, "where it does not cease to be white because it is a little rosy and a little golden in the sunshine."

Hers is a world of purity. It mounts to the clean air of "A High Kentish Pasture," where by a characteristic fancy the little white lamb against a chance golf flag appears at distance a veritable Agnus Dei. From the innumerable thrill of bird voices all, it has caught a special note at early dawn, "when the larks not for pairing but for play sing the only virginal song." It is a region mountain-clean—washed by the "minute perpetual water-flow that hides in moss and undergrowth and slips everywhere from the Alps, till hardly a blade of grass is unstirred by the delicate thrill." It is an air searched by clean winds. There is Spring with "her little divided breezes of hawthorn, rose, and lilac"—dry Autumn with its "several sweet scents," "warm pine and beech, as different as thyme and broom," and "unconfused." Her words themselves breathe with the fragrance of unnumbered things, like the first field breeze after rain or like her morning wind which has made its way at the stir of dawn through the city maze, still light with the innocence of the far countryside.

In purity, not in poverty, she has chosen effects for the most part reserved. She has been abstemious even and especially in beauty. For thirty years and in a comprehension which few essayists have received, the critics have been seeing in her landscape

art still another application of her creed of rejection, the choice of a delicacy even at the yielding of a splendour. But she has been only like nature who "hoards and saves her colours," most fair in her most delicate accidents. Mrs. Meynell's has been only an abundant economy which spares to illumine. Out of her store she has chosen the earth in its finer and cooler passages.

Like her "Dry Autumn," she can "paint beautiful things in sepia," and draw divine brown Turners of the first manner, "tinged it may be by the innumerable rosy flowering which makes soft dusky distance."

She has loved the gleam of white under the dim English sky. She has lingered to see the "water-vision that the river makes of all that is white in the mirror of the varying Thames," the meadowsweet in flower below the sober shoots of midsummer green, the temperate white of a "flying August when the grass is light with flowers." Of all the multitudinous Mediterranean moods she has remembered with most wonder "the white Mediterranean." "It blooms now and then, pale as an opal; the white sea is the flower of the breathless midsummer. And in its clear silent waters a few days in the culmination of the heat bring forth translucent living creatures, many shaped jelly-fish coloured like mother-of-pearl." And of the horizons which shine from her pages the most memorable are the white, "the utmost vanishing of the forest or the ocean in the white light between the earth and the air."

The world of her usual choice is the world of grey. It is the tone of the most delicate season, when the "skies are entangled in the winter world." It is in "the soft cloudy darkness of the sedge," the appropriate background for all prodigals of colour. It is the lining of all finest things—"the silver and pearl of a child's temple and cheek, of the undercloud, the underleaf, the underwing, seen to turn now and then to the world a grey side outward." It is the quieting grace of nature's finest "rejections," when she would bless with coolness all beauty too various or too bright. It is the tone of the bud, of growth promised and unfulfilled.

She has "shepherded" in her memory the fine little things of earth. There are "those children of light the catkins and the little lambs' tails" that are ready "when it is time to fetch the April home." There are the lady-smocks: "They must be lady-smocks, for there is nothing else so white or so swept broadcast over meadows." "There is the wandering seed, the little star, a-tiptoe wherever the wind lets it rest, and speeding on its pretty points," "walking the water on gentle breezes, journeying on all the winds up and down England." More than one prose lyric she has left us of the delicate silver seed.

She has been always a watcher for the fine line and the exquisite shape. One understands her early liking for the Japanese: "It is really Japanese art that has taught us to look for the line and the articulation, and now there is many a painter who would

refuse to engage himself in the opulence of summer trees but whom the dim and clear tints of winter delight." Hence her special taste for "the neglected beauty of winter," "the beauty of thinness," when the trees cease to be shutters and become lattices "in the strong and delicate winter woods." She has watched besides for the significant lines of vital beauty, the crumpling in its waiting-time of the leaf-to-be, the bud, thistle, or seed-pod, the beautiful mystery of life in the pinion, "its folding for the purpose of unfolding." She has loved even the long stroke of the rain-drop, "the rods that thinly strip our landscape." She has loved "all the long-stalked things that quicken the world," the rushes and reeds of her frequent delight, "unanimous, strongly tethered, swept to a single attitude." She has loved the very tip of the little grass blade when it escapes the scythe of the mower: "Our landscape is the better for the distinction of its points, its needles, and its resolute right lines."

Hers is a world of free mobilities—of birds on the wing, of seeds on the breeze. Even the tethered things are at play—flowers for the wind to catch and toss, rushes bending to fine parallels in the drive of the fresh south wind—and best to her sight the poplar, "the willing tree that dances to be seen," "mobile as the breeze of Cephalus, cool as the cheeks of Artemis, and fresh as streams." She is always sending her fancy "poplar-gathering" to meet the answering twinkle from this tree, with which "the

very sun and breath of earth are entangled." It is a world of moving shadow, the dipping shadow of the bird on wing that rushes up at last to meet its companion, or the steady shadow of the high birds "which are the movement and the pulse of solitude," or to the uplifted eye far off the shadow of a cloud, "to the coming of which spring and autumn are inconsiderable events in the landscape." It is a world where enters the glancing reflection, "a visiting creature, companion of the figure and the shadow, who leaps the stream and is scattered or shattered by the ripple." And through all blow "the winds of the world," "constraining the sun."

For the ways of her vision are the ways of light. In her companionship we are pilgrims of the sun. Our journeyings are not for mountain or for man; but "for a character of early morn, or a quality of noonday, or a tone of afternoon, or an accident of moonrise, or a colour of dusk." One recalls again a central dictum of impressionist painting: *"Le personnage principal d'un tableau, c'est la lumière."*[1] "The light," said Mrs. Meynell, "is more important than what it illuminates." And despite her coolness of tone and her lustral purities she has chosen boldly, at odds with convention, the clear light of the unshrouded sky. And in a world which travails for full many a redemption, she has pled with most eloquence, not alone in her late essay on "Charmian"

[1] Quoted from Manet by Camille Mauclair. *L'Impressionisme, etc.* (Paris, Baranger, 1904.) P. 41.

but through years of a steady devotion, for the regeneration of the skies. Not for her the impalpables of mist or the gradual dusky veil of the besetting eve. For the painter who avoids the challenge of full day she has the word of easy scorn: "Some will tell us that the unveiled light is too clear and sharp for art. So much the worse—for art."

And her own words know how to seek the sun. She has known the time through "translucent leaves" to spy on the spring "when she scatters the skies, leads them through the woods, and lets them walk the garden of the world." She has known in our day the diversities which the grosser vision disregards: "the cloud-shine," among secondary lights "the most majestic," and aloft where the sea birds pass the earth-shine too. We look at her bidding the way of the sun; and behold "a golden country, shadowless, serene." We turn at her bidding to face the sun, and discover a mystery more profound, "the luminous landscape that is full of shadows." In the secret of the sun, she is in the secret of the shadow as well.

When she turns to the sun, the descriptive art of Mrs. Meynell undertakes a bolder sight. Accepting for her own the narrow method of pure vision, she delivers her readers into the liberty of light and air. She has cared for the little things of earth, but made considerable by the passage above them of the great things in the sky, for their share of the light, and lifts us by her vision to the open spaces, to the

bright dominions of which each element is humble minister.

Perhaps it is the rain, "baby of the cloud, which is carried long enough within that troubled breast to make all the multitude of days unlike each other."

Perhaps it is the cloud itself. It descends to companion the earth and "partakes obviously in the landscape and blots out part of the view by the rough method of standing in front of it." Or it may sport with the earth from its seat aloft, "holding the sun's ray in a sheaf" . . . to strike the horizon and touch "the extreme edge with a revelation of light, or suddenly put it out and make the foreground shine. Its greatest things are done from its place aloft. Thence does it distribute the sun."

And aloft in the confidence of the sun, and here alone perhaps, Mrs. Meynell has mind for the shape and composition of her pictures. For the sun is lord of earth and of all her mysteries. In an early essay on "The Sun" published in the *National Observer,* she phrased for once her creed both for painting and for sight: "The light wind that has been moving all night is seen at morn to have not worked at random. It has shepherded some small flocks of clouds afield and folded others. Not a line, not a curve but confesses its membership in a design declared from horizon to horizon. There's husbandry in heaven." "To see the system of the sky in fragments is to miss what I learn to look for in all achieved works of nature and of art. The

true picture is one, however multitudinous it may be, for it is composed of relations gathered together in the unity of perception, of intention, and of light." Here is the only unity for which she cares, "the unity which is achieved by the comprehensiveness of the living light."

## CHAPTER XII

### "Spirit of Place"

From Mrs. Meynell we have adopted another phrase, "spirit of place," which has reached already the acceptance of an Arnold special coinage. "Spirit of Place," she wrote in the essay of the name, "it is for this we travel, to surprise its subtlety, and where it is a strong and dominant angel, that place, seen once, abides in the memory with all its accidents, its habits, its breadth, its name. It is recalled after a life-time, having been perceived a week, and is not scattered but abides, one living body of remembrance." So she has chanted for us the lyric of the "flowering heart"—not indeed of the traveller who goes for zest of the long white road, but of the traveller who loves to arrive. The joy of her voyage is not to see but to see again, the joy of the local recognition. In an early sketch, "The Age of Anecdote," we find the phrase forming with a more direct precision, though without the later poetic shaft. "This spirit of place is to nature what individuality is to men." "It is special," a character to be known.

We hail each as we approach with the recollection of Mrs. Meynell's vision, for the local colour or the

local line as truly known as gesture or habit of glance in beloved friend. Perhaps it is the grip of a wall on a long-limbed height, some homely curve in the line of German hills, a tone of weathered surface on a mouldering stone, a mystery in light deeper than the depth of shadow. Each city has its secret. There are the slender towers still left here and there from medieval Rome, though tucked away and hid from common sight. There is Genoa, delicately Gothic at heart, beneath its screenings and reconstructions. There is Avignon beyond the golden line of Burgundian hills, with her "ceremony of approach," her castle of the Popes—and there the beautiful arches of her medieval bridge, "itself the oldest thing in the world, because as children we were sung to sleep by a song of its name, 'Le Pont d'Avignon.' "

So the spirit of place challenges us all. We must needs try to capture it, to hold it until we can name it. It appears and then eludes like a melody returned into the air. But to her who had "the love of altering speech, of frontiers in the blood," it allowed approach, drifting in bell tunes from village campanili tops, shining on clear horizons. Each had for her its individual delight, owned for memory and for beauty, that local beauty in comparison with which the delicacy of leaf or flower and the shining of any fair sun uncaptured, unapplied, are but abstractions and unrelated elements.

Abstemious as we have found her in beauty, Mrs.

Meynell has preferred the lesser aspects of place. Toward our American ambitions to have the largest and most startling sights in landscape, she had always a cold ear. One remembers a comment before the enormous energies of Niagara. "'Wonderful all that water coming down,' said the tourist. 'Why wouldn't it?' replied the Irishman," speaking for Mrs. Meynell also. One remembers too that she once placed the Sussex view from an Arundel Hill, its misty but unassuming distances, in the list of great landscapes with the meeting of the Rhone and the Moselle and the profile of the Sacramento valley. In the Alps too she cared rather to note "the perpetual little waterfall that drips everywhere from the ridges and the pastures" than to walk with morning on the silver horns. For the unromantic flatness of the Low Countries she has the word of delight which only painting has usually been willing to give: "Some flat lands are beautiful, though Ruskin says not—the flatness of Holland, where a barge with rich red color seems to come sailing into the flowering fields; where a wind-mill or a dyke takes all the wind of the huge sky; where brimming rivers are pearl grey, and the roofs of the close little towns are red, and the lucid horizon line is broken by, instead of mountains such things as a cow feeding or a broad-breasted woman towing a barge, from the clean deck of which a child sings, a little dog barks." Characteristic too is Mrs. Meynell's tenderness for the villages of the world,

the "little folded flocks of mankind," whether tucked away in the English lanes or clustering on Italian heights, for guard and for need and for friendliness around the skirts of a south-Alpine castle. More than once her memory returns to the little commonplace isle of Jersey, where she played as a child—an isle flat and unromantic, a "contradictory worldkin," "strangely set in a heroic sea," its unimposing cliffs jutting out into an ocean of northern greyness in a world of grey, or again with "the vast southern peace, the unvexed and unshattered surface," and comfortable within—a comfortable growth of cabbage and a vegetable heaven.

She has liked best those aspects of place where man and nature are companions in a simple labour for the food of mankind. The very signs of toil give a beauty to the landscape where the peasant lives close to the ground, in frugal and unremitting devotion to the fruit trees or the vegetable patch. It is for man a most natural dignity, this companionship with the processes of growth. She may recall a sad peasantry: "There is the French village with its long poplars which mingle with the climate and the light, with its black cemetery crosses, with its 'hours of the night' rung for the dead long after the Angelus, with its labour and its brief night." "There is the Italian peasant, hardly able to eat, hardly able to sleep, upon the narrow margin between abundant harvest and abundant taxation, who barely escapes with his life." But in the memory of

Jersey she can recall only untroubled calm, in the health of cultivation. Better even than for its mobile aspen, Jersey is remembered for its apt compositions of potato field and cabbage, a place of "intent and instant labour in its little commonwealth and garden of tender food."

But the real spirit of place is more often found in the light than in the soil. Mrs. Meynell has said little of Greek, but if she were to ask a man's nativity, "Under what sky?" would be her essential idiom for the inquiry. The sky is "vibrating with larks" where the wheat grows green over the blunt hill-tops of North Wales; it shines fitfully from behind the "low-volleying clouds across the tender Irish fields." Over the long Atlantic stretches it is known for alien in the multitudes of the familiar clouds, "unbeautiful and therefore most strange." It is known by its light, hard over the dusty stretches of the "lean and lofty Utah," clear but not tender in California, always at its best not unmindful of the sea. But the skies of America are not her skies, and from America's ever foreign shores her memory swerves like the Gulf Stream, "rushing warmly to nourish England in the east."

Hers is not the England of the town despite her interesting *London Impressions*. The friendly lure of the streets, their load of association and history are not her care. The aspects of her London are all aspects of vision, with a limited repertory of grace. There could be no enthusiasm for "The

Climate of Smoke" in this lover of mountain clarities. Smoke may serve to "dim the glare of spotty detail," "the detail of our streets which is the closest detail in the world." But that is felt to be a coarse sight which can "give the splendid name of cloud to this poor local vesture of decay." She is ready, to be sure, for the moments of redemption. They come always with the coming of the rare London sun, catching the "life and tone of the towering steeples," or dropping its flecks into the shadowy depths "in the few streets that have kept their ancient narrowness." There is the flash back and forth of old brick in "the mystery of reflected light." There is the blaze aloft on the grey and darkening walls of the window-box. And the shipping "Below Bridge," "against a simple and dignified horizon," has a beauty of line in "the noble thicket of mast and crane." She is quick and keen for the transient value. But more evident is her constant distaste for the perversities of street architecture and the sooty stain of the drab and murky centuries.

Of English country landscape Mrs. Meynell has perhaps said surprisingly little, but lovers of her words and of England too see their England in memory best under her sky, in that light cloudy but tender. Here are the "lovely meadow lands bearing the green and flowers of Chaucer's day, hillsides that breathe by their wild thyme as remote as mountains, secluded streams—places covertly or

openly secret," low-passing streams lifting on the marges their little clear lines of buttercups against the sky. It is a country signed forever "by the man who made the hedgerow," the country which startles by its play of "frolic design," its dark streaks of hedge wilful and bizarre, cutting a pattern of checkered accident, athwart the natural lines of the hills. It is known for England by the "perilous good luck" of its shielded antiquity—its knack of tucking modernness away out of sight, where the very elms "conspire, seclude." Her memorable clouds besides are neither "the great electric masses" of Italian summer nor the shapes as it were still uncreated in the unpastured Atlantic sky. Hers are the clouds of the English south, where the great quiet masses bowl themselves perpetually over from the Channel, busy on the high matters upon which they seem perpetually intent. One sees beneath them the small world of gentle modelling, the curves and dips of miniature boldness, and through shift of shine or blowing rain now veiling now clarifying the distance, the holly thickets black in the valleys, the lordly sweep of park beeches, great open spaces of ferny common, and beyond, the level barrier of the friendly Downs warmed with absorbed light or quieted by the shadow. But Mrs. Meynell has written uneasily of English beauty. There was in her pleasure a fastidious or perhaps moral reserve. "The English way of land-owning above all has made for luxury.

Naturally the country is fat. The trees are thick and round—a world of leaves; the hills are round; the forms are all blunt; and the grass is so deep as to have almost the effect of snow in smoothing off all points and curving away all abruptness." It is a world of the park, "all curves and masses." "Thick soil below and thick growth above cover all the bones of the land, which in more delicate countries show brows and hollows resembling those of a fine face after mental experience. By a very intelligible paradox it is only in a landscape made for beauty that beauty is so ill achieved." Here in "The Lesson of Landscape" Mrs. Meynell is severe beyond her wont, revealing, as good lovers of England may think, a somewhat unnecessary refinement. But one understands. Distaste for fatness means love of the shape, delight in line. "The very richness and closeness of the glorious detail so disguise the form that the finest tree of an English park is simply a lump in the landscape. There is no drawing in it until winter has begun to reveal its articulations." More deeply perhaps Mrs. Meynell dislikes the loveliness of parks because they reject the worker. "Solitude is beautiful where it is inevitable. But it loses the great element of beauty, sincerity, when it contradicts the natural balance of life outside in the village and the field." Afar in the cities are crowded the homeless unhoused, the hungry unfilled, the worker to whom work is denied. With wistfulness, therefore, Mrs.

Meynell remembers the steady comradeship, too little known in England, of men with nature, "when she meets their labours in seed-time and harvest and seems to share their self-denial and their weariness."

Mrs. Meynell had been, we know, a child mostly in Italian—that was the simple and open secret. Her eye was Italy-taught. Beauty had first appeared to her in its Italian shapes amid the comfortable warmth of Italian fruitfulness given to the race which labours for it and is "not ungrateful for the sun." Dear, to be sure, was the sheen of white under the dim English weather, memorable in a northern mood perhaps the black mountain slopes and the melancholy sky of the northern Alpine stretches. But her heart was of the South, "where the dark cypresses keep the pallid landscape and the luminous heavens." And her spirit fled ever to the summer slopes known and waiting:

> But oh, the unfolding south, the burst
> Of summer! Oh, to see
> Of all the southward brooks the first!
> The travelling heart goes free
> With endless streams; that strife was stopped,
> And down a thousand vales I dropped,
> I flowed to Italy.

In Italy is the abstemious landscape. It is a grey country, grey with tender olive slopes, with old grey walls, with time-worn grey steps, with threads of summer rivers among grey stones, with roofs and belfries grey, with sea rocks silver grey based upon

a silver coast. Against Ruskin's charge of monotony she defends it with the jealousy of the loving remembrance. It is a "subtler South," where the spring comes so faintly that the insensitive eye can scarce recognise it, when the distance simply grows less mellow, more radiant, when the green is "imperceptibly dimmed and blushes with the minute and numberless flowers in lines longer than ocean billows." Here all changes come with delicacy.

Italy is slim and all articulate. One does best to copy Mr. J. L. Garvin in the choice of the special vignette to illustrate Mrs. Meynell's infrequent landscape:

> In the stony fields where clear,
> Through the thin trees the skies appear,
> In delicate spare soil and fen,
> And slender landscape and austere.

It is a country of lines and points, of clear-cut shapes against the Italian sky—"cypresses shaped like flames," tall flat-topped Italian pines with their beauty and fine line against their sea and sky background of light," "thin canes in the brakes, sharp aloes by the road-side, and olives with the delicate acuteness of the leaf—these make keen lines of slender vegetation."

Italy is the land of light, both tender and clear. And by a paradox natural to Mrs. Meynell it is *par excellence* the land of shade—of the dark tree, "that keeps the Paradise of Italian light and sets it open to the far-travelling eyes, the tree of nearly

black leaf that receives and absorbs the noon and keeps the night in its hollow clasp all day." "Cypresses, ilex, and pine, are throughout Italy guardians to the sun, sentinels to the distance, keepers of the sky, gates of the cloud." And beyond and afar is the luminous Italian horizon, where "against the vanishing of light, the pencilled figures are somehow lucid and shining with the brightness which the horizon can work upon the very edge of the world."

In Italy the character of the landscape is determined by the industry of man. Man has made "the little platforms for the growth of wheat in the light shadows of live leaves." Man has made the vineyard where the mulberry trees, "seeming to join hands by their vines, stand in the act of a perpetual and interminable dance," as they are passed in the flying train. "In the deep folds of the lovely Tuscan hills lies an immense garden city," populous in a special sense. "Here are no solitudes except at the tip of the hills where the soil is too thin for vines and is left to brushwood and carpets of wild lavender." "Here is tenderness of colour, beauty of series, perspective and variety of surface, in this country formed for use and purpose." In Italy is "the lovely scenery for food and raiment."

But the most cultivated of all countries, the Italy of the tillage, is not a garden alone but something better. It has the trace of wilderness still—not of the forest but of the sunny field. For love of the wild thing she has said and sung in protest at Eng-

lish cookery: "The wild flavours are the vitality and perfume of the table. Our partridges have somehow lost it in their stubble; our pheasants almost deserve the name of poultry. As for our strawberries, we have so long prized them for their corpulence alone that many of us have quite forgotten what the wild strawberry flavour is like, the wildest of all wild things. Our honey has lost it in the hives that are set amid acres and acres of gardens; so he that once tastes wild, fresh honey among the fields of Piedmont is inclined to envy John the Baptist." And elsewhere: "In Italy the vegetables, the table ones, have a wildness, a suggestion of the grass, from lands at liberty for all the tilling. Wildish peas, wild asparagus, the field asparagus which seems to have disappeared from England, but of which Herrick boasts in his manifestations of frugality . . . these are all Italian things of savage savour and simplicity."

Yet the wild thing must not be too wild. It has cut loose from the garden. But it has not fled too far—though far enough from the prim righteousness of shapely beds. And in Italy the wild thing lives most gaily upon the crumbling of majestic walls. It may be the saucy Ceres' Runaway, the little life "with flying heels" in the hollow of the sun-warmed stones—snapdragon, and marigold on the cornices of Roman churches, lettuce aloft upon the Vatican, winged by the last sea wind to bloom in the air, lodged by the last sea-breeze "sombre and soft, or the latest tramontana golden

and blue . . . wild grass, wild wheat, wild oats."

Italy too is the land of immemorial nooks. Such are the places blest with age and warmth, where man and nature have shared in centuries of making, always apart from the hurried passage of hurried feet: "You cannot pass through the real nooks of the world on your own business. You must rest there awhile, but you must go away back on your traces." Here grow the flowers in gardens "much too old to have flowers except the random ones"—gardens quiet in memory—with the silent old statue set in ever living water, the broad terraces, and down along the promontory the distant bay of steady immemorial blue, and near at hand, to frame the distance and protect the closeness, the grey old walls, "visited by the alighting of seedlings and the drift of sunny air." "No one who has dreamed of places likely to have sun-dials can ever have imagined a more brooding or forgotten retreat of stone and flower." As we have seen, the Italian spirit of place gave to Alice Meynell its best lessons for beauty and for beauty's style, not in Tuscan or familiar Genoese, but in the grave simplicity of sun-dial language.

Dull indeed is the voyager to whom the Italian spirit of place has never spoken. But to Alice Meynell it spoke its deepest meanings. It gave a message rich with the beauties of immemorial summers, charged "with antiquity and the present hour."

# CHAPTER XIII

## Literary Criticism: Tests for Poetry

It would be pompous to speak of Mrs. Meynell's canons for literature or of her critical dogmas. Such pedantry would press to formula the freest informality and reduce to catalogue a variety of delightful accidents. But as one reads the whole body of her wide literary commentary, one finds significant recurrences. There emerges, always more familiar, evident not once but twenty times, an unconscious emphasis, or a chosen word fraught with meaning privately appropriate. Always sure, always distinct, Mrs. Meynell could but reach a stability of conviction upon the art of letters.

Her criticism is, in theory, a criticism of poetry. For her own prose she took as much pains as for her verse. Its admission of the fragmentary allowed the better finish of the fragment. But her critical thoughts hovered naturally about the conditions of poetic vitality.

Her preoccupation with the idea of poetry gives sometimes an alien accent to her judgments for prose. Such as seem infrequently perverse or hasty or incomplete we guess to come usually from an unconsidered application to prose of poetic dicta. But the cluster of critical lines about the poetic

centre is all the better for her poetic authority. Her tests, accidentally but many times applied, represent an individual and suggestive body of informal "sentences."

Avoid movements: that is the first and great commandment. "The hosts of the unremembered," she has said, "are generally led by something literary called a movement. And this is only one of the innumerable signs upon the literary herd that are fit for oblivion"—sure in the end to be "forgotten in a batch." He is but a weakling who clings to the specious safety of numbers. One remembers in amused contrasts the retrospective wistfulness of Ford Maddox Hueffer,[1] sighing for a movement to cheer us again, "any movement." Mrs. Meynell perhaps might have allowed to poets what she allowed to painters of benefit from a common consciousness: "Our quarrel with English painters," she wrote in 1885, "would be that they are not modern enough, that they linger a little behind. They lose the benefit of the pull altogether which makes the long pull and the strong pull effective." Communism of vision then appeared to her less dangerous than communism of thought. A literary movement could mean to her at best but provincialism mistaking itself for fashion.

Here is but the corollary to Mrs. Meynell's adherence to the creed of literary solitude. For the group instinct in letters she had something more

[1] *Op. cit.* P. 66.

than disdain, something very like fear. It meant a disloyalty to the personal integrity, desecration of an inviolable secrecy. It ignores "the essential and interior separateness in which few men have the grace to live and in which every man is compelled to die."

From her place apart, independent of eddying modes, she adhered with sureness to the older ways of poetry.

She kept distinct a language for poetry of a more regarded honour. She held stoutly to the older guises, distrustful of modern vagaries. Still for her, poetry shared with piety in verbal dignity. Whatever our slovenliness for prose, we have in English the treasure of the poetic language, "dedicated." "The French language cunning and good" has "no place apart for poems and prayer; the whole language is at the disposal of the daily grocer and the trade-circular." The difficulties of the French conventions too "force upon the poetry of France a certain turn of prose—the composition differs, but the whole vocabulary of the language must be possible for the use of the hard-pressed poet, who can just make shift as it is." But poetic English, Mrs. Meynell would maintain, wears of right the garb of a simple consecration.

Mrs. Meynell loved too the time-honoured regularities of the established and determined metres. "To walk unbound," she says in a pleasant parenthesis of "The Tow-Path," "is to walk in prose,

without the friction of the wings of metre, without the sweet and encouraging tug upon the spirit and the line." She paid no heed, therefore, to fashions of metrical uncertainty, feeling in free verse the undetermined floating of a feather. For her part, as she tells us in "The Laws of Verse," she loved the liberty in bondage of the English metres, the laws which are "wings." "Those who have nothing to say clamour for large license in which to say it, and hence *vers libre*," she wrote of late in the *Dublin Review*. "Those who have something to say cling to the order and discipline of bonds, valuing that voluntary obedience, which is the force of art, literature, morals, religion, politics."

But the English bondage is nevertheless of liberty—a regularity uncumbered by rule of hampering convention. So our English verse may be helped but never paralysed by the re-enforcement of quantity. No one has written better of English verse, its enfranchisement, and its disciplines, than Mrs. Meynell, in her delightful poetic commentary on the English metres in her poem of the name—their "rooted liberty of flowers in breeze," "redundant syllables of summer rain," "displaced accents of authentic spring," their blitheness and nimbleness unknown to the Latin, in subjection not to "common law" but to "equity."

After all her dearest praise for the thing she loved is to call it "wild." The reader is startled till he learns that a good example of wildness is

Tennyson's "Dying Swan." He is completely reassured when he learns that poets so diverse as Gordon Hake, Laurence Binyon, Herrick, yes—even Matthew Arnold himself, have at times the touch of wildness. For the wild thing is to her never the outrageous, the untamable, or even the romantic, never the barbaric. Her wild thing in verse has always the wildness of the berry or the bloom, growing in the innocence of the lily of the field, in a glory neighbourly, but remote beyond the reach of Solomon.

Yet the wild thing, in poetry as in nature, must go only "a little wildly." It is a beauty that has known the utmost loveliness that man can make and then has run away. She has called it "escape," "remoteness," "the element of flight." It is a quality fine and fugitive, imperfect but untouched, like the runaway flower slipped from the symmetry of gardens and the humiliation of repeating patterns. Such is the beauty of Marceline Valmore: "She has the act of flight. Birds and bells, volleys of birds and flocks of bells, take wing with the lines she sets free." And for her anthology of English verse, perhaps for those who know it the most delightful of all our English garlands, Mrs. Meynell chose her title after Emerson and Zoroaster—her constant motto for best verse—which is to be written "a little wildly and with the flower of the mind." But "poetry genuinely wild," we learn to our surprise, "should be in the fortunate custody

of strict form." Least of all then does "wild" mean to Mrs. Meynell—uncontrolled.

More than another, indeed, has she insisted upon the intellectual standard in the judgment of poetry. By its stuff of thought shall poetry be known. *"Il poeta mi disse, 'Che pensi'?"* is the heading of an article of 1880 in *The Pen*. It is the question to which she puts all modern poetry. "It is a great thing to be caught to a poet's heart; it is perhaps a greater to come close to his mind." By other standards she often loved the verse of earlier times: "The simple poetry of primary passions is of past age. . . . Modern poetry should be complex and have mental charm."

It would be easy to distort Mrs. Meynell's theory by over-emphasis. Happily she was not more consistent than other critics. She would never load the wing. Of late she has again defined her position in comment upon a modern minor poet: "To say that his poetry is intellectual is not to accuse it of reasoning or proving—nor on the other hand to imply that it lacks imagery or other kind of inventive beauty. It gives not the process but the fruit and flower of reasoning." She meant simply that a poem must have an actually shaping spirit. It must bear, as we should expect her to insist, the stamp not alone of true emotion but of "vigilance."

In her estimates, below the essential distinctions which she makes between prose and poetry, there is for both a common test. For poetry as for prose

the initial and the final value is the honesty of the word. For poetry as for prose her base is the simple foundation of language. And in her survey of foreign or English letters, if she found that a thing could not stand that ordeal, it could not hope to stand by any other title. She seems sometimes meticulous upon trifling issues. She can conclude a noble appreciation with some cavil on article or particle, and that without a sense of anti-climax. One finds therein a specialized view, to some degree a limitation of sympathy. But the judgment is consistent: No quarter to be given where fails the vitality of the word—the holy body of thought. To regard it as the dress of thought in the time-honoured way is the fallacy of those who "separate a building from its architecture." The true poet must see in poetry the incarnate word, "the organic articulation of means in which metre, diction, pause, rhyme, phrase, are not accidental but essential."

She has for poetry none the less a liberality of reading and sympathy. One fears to find in her choice a narrow range, a severe rule of exclusion. But our surprise is rather in her latitude. She has inclined to the poetic gravities, to the verse dedicate as prayer, which requires "the pierced and contrite heart of the poet." But she who could call "the rainbow and the bubble sky" "those bright toys of God,"[1] delighted to see the poetic faculty in its enlightened play, its quips and wanton wiles. She

[1] "Father Tabb." See above, p. 581.

loved the glance and sparkle of similitude, "the clear, light mystery of images," always tolerant, and careless toward the Pharisaic distinctions between fancy and imagination.

But her guard of highest honour has been for the poetry of complete simplicity. She has kept in sight as the ultimate vision the poetry which is altogether simple, supremely bare, immediate to truth, and therefore beyond similitude.

Her recognition of the double realms of poetry is evident most clearly in "The Courts," finest of her verse contribution to her lovely and individual poetics. It is itself a similitude and follows a figure of the Epiphany:

> The poet's imageries are noble ways,
> Approaches to a plot, an open shrine.
> Their splendours, colours, avenues, arrays,
> Their courts that run with wine;
>
> * * * * *
>
> And yet the open heavenward plot, with dew,
> Ultimate poetry, enclosed, enskied,
> (Albeit such ceremonies lead thereto)
> Stands on the yonder side.
>
> Plain behind oracles it is; and past
> All symbols simple; perfect, heavenly-wild,
> The song some loaded poets reach at last,—
> The kings that found a child.

# CHAPTER XIV

## Literary Criticism: Practice

The most representative body of Mrs. Meynell's prose is without doubt her wide contribution to literary criticism. The American reader, who has judged her perforce chiefly from the gleanings of her thin volumes, learns the proportion with surprise. Only the two later books, the *Second Person Singular,* which represents chiefly papers in the *Pall Mall Gazette,* 1894 to 1900, and *Hearts of Controversy,* containing a few later essays from the *Dublin Review* and the *Atlantic Monthly,* give at last, if far too meagre, still accurate news that here was a literary critic of unsuspected scope.

Her fields have been on the whole clearly defined, though unfenced, giving chance for excursions in many pleasant by-paths, and for occasional flights abroad on subjects Italian, French, Spanish. Foreign subjects are, however, less common on her lists than might be expected from her constant habits of international comparison. We have seen her curiosity for American letters. The theme of literary woman, opened with her studies of George Eliot in 1876, was always recognized as specially her own. We have noted already her literary contributions to *Merry England* and the *National Observer.* The

largest body of her literary criticism, as of all her criticism, is to be found in the columns of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Here in 1895, and now and then in 1896, 1897, 1898, she marshalled her numerous company of literary ladies. In 1897 she found and used in abundance her happiest subject, the poets of the seventeenth century. In 1898, among other varieties, she treated some minors of the nineteenth century, notably, with politeness and understanding the "Spasmodics" in most need of blessing. But the *Pall Mall Gazette* was only the centre. Her whole harvest, as far as it can be garnered, represents widely dispersed studies not alone of the subjects already mentioned, but upon her older and younger contemporaries. She began in seriousness in 1880 on the short-lived *Pen* edited by Sir Arthur Trendell, but delivered over into the hands of the young Meynells to mould as they would. In these pages we can still read, if we will, the glory of the first chance. Mrs. Meynell remembered always the delight of that splendid outpouring on subjects of the best, with energy enough for anything. It was a capital apprenticeship. Since the turn of the century her criticism has been more variously placed. She has been, for instance, the patron saint of anthologies. Her best is to be found in the many critical introductions—to Adeline Cashmore's *Mount of Vision,* to her own *Flower of the Mind,* to Pusey's translation of the *Confessions of Saint Augustine,* to the poems of Christina Rossetti, and

to the Red Letter Series of the English poets—of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Jean Ingelow, and from earlier periods, of Herrick, Cowper, Blake, and the *Seventeenth Century Anthology*.

A full assembling of her dispersed studies has its disappointments for the collector. The criticism wavers; it digresses; it forgets. It has its ignorances, its perversities, its assumptions, its lapses from royalty. A frequent repetition of motif or phrase marks the limits of its resource.

But Mrs. Meynell's best, upon her most congenial themes, one who is bold may venture to call great. Her discrimination is at its best in these literary interpretations. Of other arts she wrote as amateur by the sanction of a refined and intimate vision. But of letters she had the creator's knowledge. Hence her firm and palpable hits. She has not written as the scribes.

Her reading has at its happiest the effect of the "sudden sight," the "shock of appreciation." There is play of brilliant thought; there is play of various wit; but the special triumph of Mrs. Meynell is the truth of her critical phrase. The moments of interpretative intensity are superbly said.

Mrs. Meynell has written therefore with authority. The maker of distinctions has been above all things distinct. She justifies herself and her decision *ex cathedra* in the preface to the *Flower*

*of the Mind,* "not without modesty in the firmness," as Meredith wrote of the notes. The judgment of the critic, she decides, is not of the individual imposing a personal taste upon the multitude. The choice is rather of the culture that made him, not of the man but of his heritage. A passage of the *Pen* from a section written jointly by Mr. and Mrs. Meynell, submits wittily to the diminished pomp of the critic, recalling the customs of eastern pastures where the shepherd precedes the sheep: "At present the shepherd should not be in the van, or unless his eye for grass be very keen, he will be in danger of being left in somewhat ignominious isolation. He must guide indeed, but he must guide from behind, and must have tact enough to take a hint now and then as to the kind of shrubs at which his flock wish to nibble." But Mrs. Meynell has seldom guided from behind. She made up her mind early and cast her vote in *Merry England* in 1885: "As to judicial authority, most men, we fancy, would rather be judged by a judge than by a jury, and would rather have an anthology gathered for them by an autocrat than by a conjectural plebiscite." For the most part we accept her verdict, with a deference granted to competence. The wise will not commonly dispute her qualitative analyses.

She intends no sentiment in her decisions. "Art is cruel," she says in 1888, "and will not forgive a short-coming in the one thing needful. No good

will, no aspiration, no effort, will avail." The standard must be inexorable.

She has written in her gayer moments with a daring which tickles our insurrectionary instincts. Samuel Butler left in his note-books suggestion for a possible volume of essays to be called *Literary Struldbrugs*—to touch evidently upon such reputes as have remained immortal but have aged the while, "classics" which the world by a timid inertia continues automatically to applaud. Mrs. Meynell could have ventured on that book, and it would have been capital reading.

She has killed no Struldbrugs, but she has brushed a little carelessly the ideas which we are in the habit of having. "Oblivion is clean," she writes, "but not so encumbered remembrance." She casts mild aspersions, to the delight of some of us, on the mortuary celebrity of Gray's "Elegy." Addison, she avows, gave and took of the circumambient platitude "until he was almost incapable of coming within arm's length of any real and spiritual emotion." She raised an outcry of alarm by noting limitation in "the classic novelist," Jane Austen.

Critics have been sometimes amused at the summariness of Mrs. Meynell's decisions. A writer of the nineties diverted himself excellently with what he called her "ukase manner." He called up a fancy picture of a bewildered Gibbon, learning in the Elysian fields of her attack upon his "following,"

crying out, "In a parenthesis!" as he falls back among the asphodels. And indeed the parentheses of Mrs. Meynell, already noticed, containing her less deliberate intentions, are sometimes used as sally-ports. The door is suddenly thrown open; there is a sortie; a luckless captive is seized—not indeed for death but for the pillory of a fine ridicule. But the pillory is used only for the culprit who has sinned against the honour of the phrase.

In parenthesis or in organised diatribe Mrs. Meynell found life-long zest in the baiting of Swinburne, the poet specially made for her reprobation. We must enjoy, whether we like it or not, the valiant castigation of the poet "indigent in thought, affluent in words," who "took the treasure of the language and put it in his pocket," for the fatal purpose of sound, not of sense, "whose thoughts had their origin, their home, their authority, their mission, in his own vocabulary and the passions of other men." Here is finality suggestive of Mrs. Meynell's admiration for Dr. Johnson. But one understands the recoil. When the hypothetical test question was asked of Swinburne, *"Che pensi?"* he gave, according to Mrs. Meynell, no reply.

Such sallies as these, and they are few, are instances of her less happy derision. In such philippic her style is sometimes hurried or voluble for all its timber. A gentle spirit committed to satire may often force the note from unconscious reluctance. " 'To be gentle and sensitive, and to hurt the foolish

and stolid! Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?' "

We share with relish her reproach upon the old-fashioned lady of letters for her appalling vivacity of manner, clever, sustained, but in the end fatiguing. Over-skittishness Mrs. Meynell felt to be the seal of woman's limitation in letters as in life. It made the monotony of Lady Mary Montague, of Miss Mitford, "with her indefatigable little animation." And the letters of poor May Moses, which might have been allowed to rest in their grave, "have the vivacity which is the staple quality of the lady-journalist of our own day." It has "a shape and a kick." The jibe is not peevish, but a recall to the quieter touch of the masculine artist.

Colder otherwise than her usual criticism are her studies upon the women writers of fiction. They are all there in the old columns, usually of the *Pall Mall,* — Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Mrs. Inchbald, Mrs. Shelley, Miss Ferrier, Mrs. Trollope, and the minors of her own day— Mrs. Lynn Linton, Mrs. Wood, Ouida—a list not ended before the time of Edith Wharton. For the really great among the craft Mrs. Meynell had no effort to find sympathy. George Eliot, the Brontës, are subjects of her most intimate pains. But one feels in the average sketch a slighter than her usual quality. One misses her most finished care. They are pleasant and witty returns upon the elder ladies of fiction. But it is sometimes an injustice to recall

them. They have been altogether abandoned by their fastidious author. They were in writing more incidental, more hastily furnished forth. The resurrection of the older novel which is still going on, requires, besides, more scholarship in its development than Mrs. Meynell pretended to in this special sphere. She had not furthermore — perhaps her doctrine of literary solitude partly forbade it—interest in the evolution of the novel, in the emergence of sport types, which is half our fun with older fiction. One is baffled, too, in her judgments by the characteristic use of the phrase standard to evaluate the novel, to gauge either the excellence of the Brontës or the defects of Fanny Burney. Would that the test were more frequently applied today! But the most ardent purist must feel that it leaves deep levels still ungauged.

The intrinsic difficulty with Mrs. Meynell's study of the old fiction is that the novel, as she has well said of the motif of honour, "is a noble thing of this world." And with the great worldlings of English letters Mrs. Meynell had scant affinity. Chaucer she liked rather than loved. To the eighteenth-century "masculine" novel, alone out of all letters, she applied a touch gingerly and uncertain. Of Thackeray we know her doubts. And the creative power of Shakespeare is honoured not so much for its Falstaffs as for its creations already noted of "immaculate conception." There is, we must confess, something inconsistent about our literary

morals. But we need for the full appraisal of fiction "that modern heresy, the pride of life," and—we should perhaps add—the lusts of the flesh.

Those critics, therefore, who have found naïve Mrs. Meynell's complaint at Jane Austen's scant spirituality, have some cause for their protesting gasps. Some such reason, no doubt, was Miss Repplier's when she described Mrs. Meynell of late as profoundly unhumourous. But negative criticism, which leaves its story still actually unattempted, is specially unlucky in the case of Mrs. Meynell, ignoring, as it does, her more than common sense and her delightful wit. It is well to recall Meredith's witness—and Meredith was likely to know—"She has the comic insight eminently among modern writers." It is well besides to remember that Mrs. Meynell's air toward the sense of humour was of condescension: "He who sees the joke holds himself somewhat superior to the man who would see it, such as it is, if he thought it worth his eyesight. The last-named has to bear the least tolerable of modern reproaches—that he lacks humour; but he need not always care." We should remember besides that Mrs. Meynell has done justice elsewhere to the humours of Jane Austen. She demurs only at too protracted a contemplation with too foolish a face of praise.

But to speak so long of Mrs. Meynell's faint praises is to have been already false in emphasis. She is remembered and memorable in criticism for

her more than common generosity, for what she has called, praising another, "the noble intellectual work of admiration." Her characteristic sketch is not a dissection but an act of recovery.

Her words upon the Brontës have always the warmth of a most inward comprehension. From her childhood their story entered her heart for pity and fear. She knew in all closeness the prim outrageousness of Charlotte, the tempestuous force in the passions of Emily. From 1883 till 1911 their names are frequent in her pages. For Charlotte the sympathy is perhaps largely personal, for "the black limitation" of her martyrdom, for her acquaintance with grief "locked with intricate wards within the unrelaxing and unlapsing thought." She has in critical hours high reverence for the energies of Charlotte's genius, the very energies which in Charlotte's opinion Jane Austen lacked—"what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what blood rushes through." But her chief joy is at Charlotte's enfranchisement from bondage of the bland eighteenth-century phrase, to produce, in the "few but wonderful pages" of her deliverance, "some of the great and simple prose of the century." Closer perhaps was Mrs. Meynell's sense for the quality of Emily, "the great and lonely intellect," the "intensity that never falters." These Yorkshire purities and passions seem remote indeed from the finished felicities of our critic. There could be no better witness to her reach of sympathies than her

respect for the raw and pulsing powers which struck their way to freedom in these spirits unfortunate but untamable.

She does her most liberal and triumphant justice perhaps upon the art of Dickens, the very novelist who might seem beyond the pale of her ken and sympathy. Her admiration was indeed postponed. Dickens is one of the few themes upon which her judgment materially alters by experience of years. It grows always in pleasure and in grace. Despite the memories of her childhood friendship, her recoil is frank in the eighties from the highlights and the sharp lines distasteful to a critic fastidious and still held in the ultra-fastidiousness of youth. She is frank about the "coarse obviousness and emphasis," the workmanship careless of refinement. Hot in early years and never entirely abandoned is her protest at a quality unchivalrous in the Dickens caricature of women, his consent, at least, to the popular vulgarization which presents woman in a banter by no means lovely. But already she did honour to a vision stronger than her own, though by no means as exquisite as hers—the illumination of the visible face of life, "the sights imagined with extraordinary precision," "the mental seeing power comparable only to that of a child."

By 1899 Dickens has won. The *Pall Mall* articles of January present a revision of her early judgment, in a temper friendly and humane. The substance of these appears in her final essay on

Dickens published in the *Atlantic Monthly* of 1903, and reprinted in *Hearts of Controversy*. It is a genial reading of the great novelist, wise and comprehending for things not according to the critic's natural temper. For delays and previous scruples she makes the amplest amends. Dickens is pronounced still "an obvious and positive man," but with recognition that genius can be obvious as well as subtle. Here is delicate defence for the weakness still scouted even by Dickens lovers, the "leap for human sanctity," his rush for "heavenly caricature." Here is skilled defence for caricature itself, "the honest game between man and nature," relish for "the art of two dimensions." Here is, enhanced to delight, Mrs. Meynell's sense for the Dickens watchfulness over "inanimate things and landscape" or over the exhilarating oddities of men. Here is zest unqualified for the drive of the Dickens narrative, "the hammering blow of the advance." Here is, to the astonishment of the supercilious, championship of the Dickens style, the style so cheaply defamed by the cheap—defended not alone for its descriptive vitality, but for its accuracy, its elegance. One appreciates the climax of Mr. Chesterton in his boast that everybody now respects the Dickens phrase, "And everybody means Mrs. Meynell."[1]

But the essential criticism of Mrs. Meynell is of

[1] *Charles Dickens*, a Critical Study. New York, Dodd, Mead, 1906. P. 109.

poetry. Here she breathes her native air. Here she gives authentic news of the country undiscoverable but by grace. "The country of poetry is her home," she has said of another, and she is " 'manifest housekeeper' and does nothing out of it." Mrs. Meynell knows the meaning of the words she uses, wise not alone in poetry but in what she has called the approach thereto. "How does this poet or that approach the best beauties of his poem," she has asked—"from the side of poetry or from the side of the commonplace?"

Mrs. Meynell has known by nature the ways and the approaches of that old-fashioned figure now gone, "the poetess." At her hands, to be sure, the woman poet could expect no "praise of exemption" as for work by a woman and for the women. She received what seemed her due, and no more, admission without handicap to the universal rivalry. But she could count always upon the whole attention of a woman's sympathy.

The slighted Jean Ingelow is eagerly defended. This was a repute wronged by the favour of foolish sentiment as by the contempt of careless superiority. Mrs. Meynell asserts without over-statement a moderate and actual talent. She has caught the tone of this fluid verse, its resonance not as of song but of lyric call "across free fields and over waters, and into open skies." She applauds without reserve the pressure of the strong speed for dramatic story. She remembered until the end how her praises for

Jean Ingelow shocked George Meredith. But defiance in a rush for justice was her most congenial act.

With the women poets of surer eminence, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the commonplace of criticism has always associated Mrs. Meynell. But there is no actual bond except the tinge of blood relationship with Mrs. Browning and the frequent accident of womanhood. For both, Mrs. Meynell has throughout her years the respect of a rare discernment. She judges them in love and conscience, but from her separate place.

Christina Rossetti is tested in all fineness by a poetic gift as sure as her own and an intellectual faculty her superior. Altogether reverent, therefore, for the quality of Christina's genius, Mrs. Meynell misses nevertheless in her work, as one might expect, the correction of what Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as she remembers, used to call "fundamental brainwork." The poetic element is felt as sometimes thin—a "mere film of poetry" in certain passages. But withal it is "true as gold leaf is gold"; for here is the poet who approaches her theme, as the critic bears witness, never from the commonplace: "Christina Rossetti always drew near from the side of poetry; from what to us who are not altogether poets, is the further side. She came from beyond those hills."

For the headlong spirit of Mrs. Browning, ardent, wilful, passionate, in "unstable equilibrium,"

there is glad and knowing justice. There is a smile for the martial figure, "marching in doublet and hose." There is love for the generosities, "tossing out basketfuls." "She always gave herself away with a rapid and generous hand." But the "vehement and rushing spirit" is held right womanly, womanly in its very imperfection.

For the masculine vigours of Robert Browning, always stable, Mrs. Meynell has a more spontaneous pleasure, renewed with zest during returns of twenty years. She is friend of his roughness; she is friend of his obscurity, forgiving for the thought's sake the trouble he costs us, even in *Jocoseria,* where most of us lose our patience. "Difficulty of thought," we are not surprised to hear, "is the very heart of poetry." She honours, inevitably, the integrity of his art, its wise and sufficient "solitude": "When a poet triumphs as Browning over the resilience of the surrounding spirit, when his hands are not wedged in the century, he reveals an innate originality." "Stuff for strength" she is altogether free to like. She interprets him with knowledge as man of the world in poetry, curious, experimental, wakeful in human things. She interprets him in his health, strong and sane even in the profoundest mysticism where the multitude of poets admit "a touch from the delirium of dreams."

So wise is Mrs. Meynell's sympathy that we note with surprise its limitations. The intellect she has hailed, but she has somehow missed the depths of

the Browning genius, finding it shrewd rather than profound. She has never heard the passions elementary and full as they plunge robust and virile in the firm hold of that audacious spirit, by no means only of man of the world.

Her final word of 1912 registers her serious stricture upon the Browning note of optimism which has seemed to others than Mrs. Meynell a denial of fact. She pronounces it partial, as inadequate to life as the cheaper and more popular pessimism, which is to her the spiritual wickedness in high places of our modern thought. We admit her sense. "All's right with the world" is not the obvious comment upon our bewildered planet. But one hesitates to condemn the witness of a genius abundant, sane in robust and creative energies. As it rebounds in Browning, who dared as far as any to penetrate the depth of human sin, so it rebounds of right where creative art works its way to life in the act of productive genius. So the Creator, as we are astonishingly told, "saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good."

Browning, on the whole, has proved able to take care of himself among the critics. Mrs. Meynell's word upon her elder contemporaries has been most effective in the act of restoration. She has read in her "singleness" the great Victorians lauded by their time, who have passed to the inevitable reaction and passed not far enough for the return, who are temporarily "bygone without being old." Our present

decade is already busy in odd corners with the resuscitation of the Victorians. The fashions of disparagement continue. But for all that they are coming back, the men who were dominant in the sixties. "There never was so much separate and single literature written in our language as then. They were authors steady, unboastful, related to all time, classic, romantic, new." So said Mrs. Meynell. She has had a distinguished share in this the early stage of their recovery. She did not wait for the fashions.

We can all rejoice in the recovery of Tennyson, misunderstood in the possession of both "a style and a manner." The manner is admitted with frankness, "the slightly falsetto note when he intends to sing his manliest," the daintiness too choice, "the noble landscape and in it sometimes figures ready-made." But the defence is loyal, for the phrase which goes a-venturing not alone for preciosity but for light, for his note of nature in "imagination which needs no imagery," for the word of magic which "withdraws to dreams, withdraws to summits," the word simple and wild of "the exalted senses." Tennyson is given back to us at last, the style of radiance freed from captivity of the manner at this chaste touch moist and cold, the touch of poetical criticism.

The beauty in Mrs. Meynell's criticism of Ruskin we have already noted. There was need for such temperance as hers amid a popular injustice, which

judged the great dictator by his extreme word, which condemned for inconsistency without thanks for abundance in the great intelligence too busy with projects to be complete in each, cutting out always new things, new philosophies, new arts, new categories, new worlds. Better than another perhaps could she catch the originality of that seething mind whose thoughts were never purchased "ready-made." Better than another could she apprehend the genius of that vision, "those greatly wise and alert watchings of the changes of the world." She always loved, she confessed, to "hear the Renaissance abused." But her reports in *Reviews and Views* on Ruskin's lectures as early as 1883 show a sympathy for "the wilful and exquisitely humorous inconsequence far better than anyone else's cohesion and pertinence." In 1901 at the Ruskin exhibition she saw the drawings as he would have wished, loving when he cut loose from the Turner imitation, "his grasp of the stone of buildings, the depth of earth of his mountains, and the level valleys that are the manifest floor of the world, all masterly with the mastery of care."

Her fuller analysis of Ruskin for the Modern English Writers Series met a reception somewhat disappointing to Mrs. Meynell. She had found a subject worthy of her mettle. We remember Meredith's jubilation over the new departure: "No more anthologies or examination of minor moths." But failure, if failure there was, was felt at the

time to lie rather in the odd notion of the publishers that there could be at all a "hand-book" of Ruskin, that other than a specious simplicity could ever be achieved for the presentation of his work. The book has, indeed, its limitations. It makes its cautious and difficult way, "the scruples and minor emphases projecting from it." But there is no uncertainty in the masterly introduction, still the most illuminating study of Ruskin on the small scale that has been produced. It is wise if only for the last interpretative sentence: that the student most grieved at the last for that lamentable spirit "must wish him to have been not less but more a man sacrificed."

Mrs. Meynell's finest witness to the Ruskin powers is probably her preface of 1910 to the *Seven Lamps of Architecture.* Here is her final tribute to that superb energy which changes of times and tempers will not quench: "Compared with his great vitality, the vivacity of other writers is little more than an insignificant and ineffectual agitation."

A generation in reaction from Meredith does well to ponder also over Mrs. Meynell's sense for the Meredith vitality, "such a vitality as nothing can hinder or rather such a vitality as all things serve." Even in 1883, a year like others negligent for Meredith's verse, she hailed the stout field note of the *Joy of Earth;* for his prose poetic and titanic as she felt it, her honor never wavered. She lays her finger on the essential weakness, failure to be lofty

through fear of the ordinary: "He must be afraid of nothing who writes at the greatest heights, and Meredith feared commonplace." But she knows the richness as of "a stream flowing westward and taking the colours of the westward aspect, while the innumerable little waves beat backward and reflect the spaces of the open sky." "There is no intricacy, there is no labour, there is no accumulation, that does not pass up into the flame of life and make it more erect."

She judges him among novelists the great interpreter: "When Matthew Arnold called poetry a criticism of life, the phrase was taken away from the novel, to which it should belong." Meredith's is a judgment not alone that "watches life, perceives, detects indeed, but has also the spiritual insight, wisdom as well as knowledge, and not only temperament but passions, that not only states the problem but accounts for it." She has put, in its nobility and in its lack, the strength of the Nature philosophy, though able, in recollection of Meredith's confidence, to see in it only symbol: "Thou shalt love thy Mother Nature with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy soul and with all thy strength. Thou shalt put thy whole trust in her. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt not love thyself at all." The message is the same from the earthiness of Meredith and from the transcendentalism of Patmore—that man is spirit.

Mrs. Meynell's honour has been given with least scruple and reserve to Coventry Patmore. It was a position taken easily and with ardour. It was a position held with only more insistence as the years denied to Patmore the place which she believed his right in the English hierarchy. The reprints in the *Rhythm of Life* and the *Second Person Singular* are but slightly representative of her persistence. Essays appeared in *Merry England,* as we have noted, in the *Weekly Register,* the *National Observer,* the *Athenaeum,* the *Outlook,* the *Catholic Cyclopædia,* in prefaces, to her own selection, *Poetry of Pathos and Delight,* and to the *Angel in the House;* and valuable by-comment in the *Pall Mall Gazette,* the *Dublin Review.* In this championship her language takes on a dignity gnomic and oracular, rising to sober passion in the candour of a high admiration. The extreme adulation of Patmore, as it is represented by Mrs. Meynell, seems sometimes to the uninitiate something of a cult, not quite clear to the lay mind. She has seen more in Patmore than we, greatly venerating too, can always feel. But the critic is a poet of instructed sensibility which might well give us lessons. "Ask saints of heaven," said Chaucer, "for they can tell." And the poets may well have the same authority for poetry.

And as usual, Mrs. Meynell is temperate toward the adversary, recognizing, especially in the earlier studies, the puzzles to our understanding. Some pleasant raillery there is for the Toryism of the

Patmore tastes and choices. Some allowance there is for readers of the *Angel* who cannot, like Patmore, find the proper setting for the exposition of love's transcendencies in "the circumstance and accessory of the tea table." But there is no wavering of claim.

Patmore is the poet who most exactly among moderns fulfils her peculiar tests. He is poet of "enormous sincerities." He is the poet who delivers best the authentic message of the mystic, far more certain than is the average man of that to which his own senses bear witness. He is a priest in poetry, authorized by a tacit consecration. "Poetry," as the critic quotes from Patmore, "is the gravest among the undertakings of mankind." She has found him strong in disciplines, free in delight, orderly and "wild" at once. He is besides, by her analysis, possessed of eminent "mental energy." He is—and here he comes close to Mrs. Meynell's understanding—the "watcher," profoundly vigilant, apprehensive of experience, brave for compassions beyond the wont of literature, which is ever "ingenious to evade the heart of human suffering." As years drew on, with the popular appreciation of Patmore still deferred, the critic dwelt more on the essential solitude of the genius, enduring "the mortal touch" of sorrow in august isolation. She has found Patmore—and this is her first and last emphasis—creator of the organic word, the actual classic, as she grew to say, in whom verity of thought and of phrase are fused. "The words of Coventry Pat-

more are born alive," she says, still undaunted in 1921. Her ultimate praise she has reserved for the ultimate simplicity, the naked greatness achieved once or twice, and although achieved so rarely, enough for the repute of a major genius.

The criticism of Patmore represents Mrs. Meynell's most constant and ambitious effort to extol a gift which she held superior; but her courtesy is ready on what she thought the somewhat lower levels. It warms the heart to gather in from the dispersion of the press, of late from the *Observer* and the *Dublin Review,* her notices of younger contemporaries. For a host of minors she made ready, as she felt due, "a distinguished and separate welcome." She never used the cruelty of art against writing pure and honestly and passably sincere. And some she could delight to honour. There is respect sure and eager for what she felt to be the defeated fame of Stephen Phillips, wronged by inconsiderate praise and irresponsible neglect. In Gordon Hake, less known, she finds the "tradition of deep composure." Laurence Binyon is forgiven the *vers libre* for the truth of his war poems, "in every page as single as they are general and as new as they are constant." The religious poems of Lionel Johnson are honoured as much for the classic quality of their art as for the innocent conflict of the soul revealed, sacred since "without violence or vehemence," having "only power."

The poetry of Francis Thompson, for whom she had in his need the care of the mother for the child, the guidance of a Beatrice for a Dante, whose Beatrice she was in poetry, has always her honour. It is of a quality which seems often remote from the frugalities of her own method. But her reminiscence in the *Dublin Review* at his death ends with untroubled confidence the tempered justice and faith. She admits and mildly rebukes "the splendid offence of excess," but commits all without misgiving to the future: "For no reaction of taste, no similitudes of language, no change in the prevalent fashions of the art, no altering sense of the music of verse can lessen the height or diminish the greatness of the poet's thought, or undo his experience, or unlive the life of the elect soul, or efface its passion." Thompson, she feels, is worthy companion of an earlier song, able to hear from the past the summons to the seventeenth-century fellowship which she quotes from Crashaw:

> Come and come strong,
> To the conspiracy of our spacious song!

She added to the summons her own voice. The inevitable field for Mrs. Meynell's study was the seventeenth century. And that period of essential poetry found in her its essential critic. It was to her the century of poetic English: "There was a time about the period of Herrick, when the national speech had in itself a point, a turn, a kind of innocent

wit." It was a century of "bright excess," of "fair and flagrant things"—the flagrant freely forgiven for the commingling of the fair. It was the century of gleaming obliquities, of beautiful risks, of what always rejoiced the heart of Mrs. Meynell, the play in verse of mind in love with its own speed. It was the century of ripeness, of berry and fruit following "the sixteenth-century flower." It was the century of what she has so often called "the spiritual senses," found wherever poetry is quick with mystery—in Blake, in Wordsworth, in Coleridge, found, indeed, wherever shine in clearness "those high characters of poetry," "rapture, nature, spirituality, light."

Her seventeenth-century studies, except for the deliberate prefaces of later years, are fragments rapidly wrought. But they recapture, as perhaps no work of deliberate scholarship has recaptured, "the golden pomp." They are there in numbers, as they "sang and shone"—Herbert strangely little—but Jonson, Campion, Drummond, Crashaw, Vaughan, Cowley, Waller, and in later reference, Traherne—as they sing and shine for us, but brightened in transmission through her word. Sometimes she brings the gift of a new and illuminating approach. Perhaps it is a recollection of a poet too commonly consigned to the promiscuity of a group. Such is "My Lovelace," the "Lovelace of the dance": "Lovelace, who loved freedom, seems to be enclosed in so narrow a book; yet it is but a hermi-

tage. . . . To shake out the light and spirit of its leaves is to give a glimpse of liberty." Sometimes there is in a forgotten "Autolycus" a break-up of critical tradition, as in her sense for the elusive Marvell, who has kept his counsel so well through the centuries. Mrs. Meynell has known before others the Marvell of "the wild civility," "who did meet two or three times a muse he hardly looked for among the trodden paths, a spiritual creature which had been waiting behind a laurel or an apple tree, and found himself for the moment a wilder and a simpler man." The judgment has the rightness of the pure ray.

To Mrs. Meynell the seventeenth is above all the century of the religious lyric. Elsewhere in English verse she has found it lovely and native. But it is most purely through its divine poetry that "the seventeenth century breathes its fragrant breath and shows its visionary lights." The saints are there in their private places apart. But in the radiance of this afternoon the poets become mystic without painful discipline, "by their genius and the divinity of their imagination, which broke through time and was excused novitiate, and made free to sing the pomp of spiritual pleasures." Theirs is the lyric closest to Mrs. Meynell—the lyric "which brought poetry and sanctity to meet." We have noticed the affinity between her prose and the prose of the seventeenth century. Her verse, besides, will be seen, in its singular and diverse fashion, far more

than the verse of Francis Thompson, to be of the seventeenth-century kin—kin of its wit, kin of its thought, kin of its word. Her criticism has at its best the transparency through which a spiritual beauty may be perceived in peculiar clearness. It has the "adult innocence."

# CHAPTER XV

## The Character of Mrs. Meynell's Poetry ("Later" and "Last Poems")

The volume of Mrs. Meynell's *Poems* published in 1923 contains all her established work that she has meant to keep, with twenty-four recent poems added to the known collection. The complete series reveals a rather clear progression; it draws a fine arc through the three ages of man. The earlier promises but does not altogether reveal her stronger art. One does best to study her essential quality as it takes its predestined form in the section entitled "Later Poems," which includes work as early in first publication as 1890, but dates for the most part from 1895 to 1916, covering thereby her greatest poetic yield.

The garland of "Later Poems" has been therefore twenty years in growth, taking on from issue to issue small accretions. It began in the little cluster, *Other Poems,* privately printed in 1896, of ten numbers, which had been for the most part previously published in the *Pall Mall Gazette,* in 1895, a strong year of poetic beginning after her

long "silent time for verse." In this little group are already the three poems by Mrs. Meynell well known and most generally loved, "The Lady of the Lambs" called later "The Shepherdess," "The Lady Poverty," and "I am the Way." In 1901 this was reprinted with nine poems added, some of these written in 1895—under the title of *Later Poems.* A reissue of *Later Poems* with some few omissions appeared as *The Shepherdess and Other Verses* in 1914. Already in 1913 *Later Poems,* with notable additions, especially from the productive year 1911, had been incorporated in the standard collected edition. In 1917, during the War, was separately published the collection entitled a *Father of Women,* of like quality to the poems of the previous decade, though sharing the profound disturbance of those terrible years. These too were added in the collection of 1919 to the *Later Poems.* The *Later Poems* in the collection of 1923 therefore represent the earliest and latest of Mrs. Meynell's best poetry achieved under her most conscious impulse.

We recognise the touch of the author of *Preludes.* Here still are the softened tones, the gentler skies of her "west wind days." Here is the vision unclouded. Here are the sympathies attuned to vibrations of a delicate scale. Here is a stronger purity, like wild fragrance as we have learned it from her definition—"cleanness positive and in action."

Like the earlier, the later are poems of interior inspiration. Her prose we have found commonly perceptive, sensuous; her poetry is even beyond the wont of the lyric, inward. From the fine-strung impressionism of her prose we might expect objectiveness of verse. And Mrs. Meynell can well enough, when she wishes, fuse and temper the picture-phrase. The phrase of lustre is hers, lit with sunshine. The phrase bare and searching is hers, like the wind of her "Rainy Summer":

> No scents may pause within the garden-fold,
> The rifled flowers are cold as ocean shells;
> Bees, humming in the storm, carry their cold
> Wild honey to cold cells.

But the registry of the senses, chosen by more than one modern school as its very stuff of poetry, is to her but its mere beginning, its proper but casual felicity. Her poetry issues at its best from what we have found her calling the "exalted" or the "spiritual senses."

We pass on familiar ways, but in the presence of poetic beckonings with a summons to the uplifted heart. Her poetry finds through things visible and lovely a transmission from upper levels—not indeed a revelation but an assurance of divine secrecy. It is like her "Thrush before Dawn," singing—ignorant, passionless, but singing of ancient knowledge and ancient desire, of things "wilder than song," "sweeter than youth," "clearer than Greece":

All natural things! But more—Whence came
This yet remoter mystery?
How do these starry notes proclaim
A graver still divinity?
This hope, this sanctity of fear?
O innocent throat! O human ear!

Poetry of such gravity, tuned to outward perception, turns inward for its essential content.

The excellence of the early verse Coventry Patmore called long ago its feminine quality. Its excellence and its limitation! For by a Patmorian oracle the feminine principle reaches its full potency only when it is achieved in the soul of man. Just what this means despite Patmore's distinctions between the consciences masculine and feminine of the unit-soul, we shall understand only when the feminine principle *zieht uns hinan.* It is an ancient riddle. Perhaps the Puritan Milton has put it best for poetry in his interpretation of the primordial moral distress: that human nature in Eden completeness is not Adam and Eve, but Adam plus Eve, each partial, both together a full being. But for temporal criticism we may to some degree recognise without too vain analysis in the *Later Poems,* as Patmore recognised in the earlier, the feminine poet within her own psychology.

Her purity is the purity of woman, circumspect, conscious, articulate for all its reticence. Her serenity is the serenity of woman with her soul at quiet, moving in light, free but still, guarded. Her

intuition too is of the woman, subtle, eager, unshrinking from the consequence of its own sensitiveness. From the search of woman's pity, from woman's need to suffer in surrounding suffering has come the penetration of her verse, always graver as years have deepened her ruth at human haplessness. Such relentless contemplation of sorrow is the surest token of the feminine spirit, which, since it may not heal them, must bear the sins of the world. For, when other Madonnas shall have been forgotten, Our Lady of Sorrows will remain, holding swords to her breast.

The representative poetry of Mrs. Meynell has a firmness not quite foretold by *Preludes*. To use the word feminine for this her mature voice is to accept her correction already offered. It must denote not a handicap but an endowment—a positive thing conceived "not as a grace but as a force." The rule of a sure intent is the special excellence of *Later Poems*. For poetry as for prose her art is "vigilant."

We listen now in vain for echoes. The influence-hunter will turn away now, disappointed. We know Mrs. Meynell's favour for the seventeenth century, but the proclivities of her verse which bend toward the seventeenth century appear at least as early as 1890, seven years before her critical absorption in that age of sense and spirit. We may trace perhaps some hints bestowed upon the younger poets who did her honour; we can find no evidence

of gift returned. We have known the generosities of the Meynell household for Francis Thompson, the affection and forbearance of Mrs. Meynell for this lovely and dependent spirit, the delight of *Merry England* and of both Meynells in their discovery beyond price—no less than a true and abundant poet in an age which, as we always think, "can rear them no more." But occasional similarities of theme which have been noted suggest no debt on Mrs. Meynell's part. The year 1895, besides, was a glad year of the Meredith friendship. "The Shepherdess," indeed, sprang from suggestion of the *Amazing Marriage*. But the literary kinship of Mrs. Meynell and George Meredith one knows to have been for prose, not for verse.

We hunt with more expectancy for the influence of Coventry Patmore. We know the close intimacy of the elder man with both the Meynells. We remember the noble poetic friendship of the two poets who knew each the farthest reach of the other's power.

There was certainly the spur of intellectual difference. We can imagine, by at least one touch of respectful raillery in print, a sparkle from the friction of these delightful opposites—the confident liberalities of Mrs. Meynell, the set conservatism of Patmore—the determined feminism of the lady, the proclaimed adoration of the man for the idea of woman exalted as "the weaker vessel." One contrasts with most amusement Mrs. Meynell's prefer-

ence for "the little less" with Patmore's relish for "the little more," his delight in the ring of short finalities, his humorous pressure of extremes.

More evident are the points of intellectual agreement. We can guess the stimulus from the master-mind of Patmore, eccentric with the bias of rare sincerity, with its astounding fusion of two qualities which Mrs. Meynell respected and shared—mystic sight and gnomic sense. Strewn freely through their prose are common dogmata for life and letters, articles of creed which appeared usually first from Patmore's hand, which may well have been accepted from Patmore by Mrs. Meynell, who loved to acknowledge debt to her older contemporaries. The matter is unimportant; they are articles which Mrs. Meynell would have chosen for herself in any case. Purity was for both a royal test of poetic quality. Both judged poets by their degree of apprehension for so-called "spiritual senses." Both held to the inspiration of law and bondage, used by genius for "inflection, not infraction," a motif which Mrs. Meynell once shaped for verse. Both, acquainted with grief, dreaded and abhorred for literature what they derisively called pathos—the exploitation of deliberate sensibility. We have heeded Mrs. Meynell's exhortation to a discreet gaiety as the reasonable manner of goodness. And the philosophy of Patmore made continuous disputation with the dismal rationalities. We have noted the common penchant for paradox. Illustrations of common

thought could be multiplied. But the poetic qualities of the two appear always more independent.

One cannot doubt, to be sure, a quickening of the spirit from the meeting in space and time of these two among the most individual of poets. We know from more than one of Mrs. Meynell's poems her knowledge of the vitalising touch of one poetic nature upon another, the release of spirit in the perception of another poetic energy. The theory of poetic interchange is boldly phrased in "The Two Poets," where under the symbols of wind and beech tree the spirits of solitary poets strike and in the act of union realise the word from the silence:

> "Whose is the word?
> Is it I that spake? Is it thou? Is it I that heard?"
> "Thine earth was solitary, yet I found thee!"
> "Thy sky was pathless, but I caught, I bound thee,
> Thou visitant divine."
> "O thou my Voice, the word was thine." "Was thine."

It is a new and subtle variety among echo-dialogues. But there are no real echoes between the verses of Mrs. Meynell and Coventry Patmore. The courage of her poetry to grapple with endurance may have been strengthened by his example. Her penchant for the religious theme may have been increased by the fellowship; for both the daring of the mystic quest was the greatest adventure of poetry as of life. But one speculates without conviction. In 1895 as in 1923 the verse of Mrs. Myenell was her own.

Her art for poetry as for prose is a consistent "rejection." It was in austerity, we may suppose, that she turned from the objective to the interior theme. She will owe no debt to natural beauty so-called, "the modern passion of this hundred years." Her message requires a harder technique than verse landscape-painting, without which, she has said of late, "poetry is hardly poetry." For herself too she refuses the riot of conceit, the play of imagery which she likes to see another dare. "Fair and flagrant things" are to be loved, but they are not her things. She will not dally with the externals of pictorial fancy. The limit of fancy has been set by Shakespeare more neatly than by all philosophers:

> Tell me, where is fancy bred?
> In the heart or in the head?
> * * *
> It is engendered in the eyes.

And with exterior adornment Mrs. Meynell has not been tempted to deck her verses grave or gay.

She has refused, and most strongly as the years went on, the lure of emotional indulgence, which she felt to be the easy sin of woman's poetry. Her reaction was away from the rapt intensity of Christina Rossetti and the vehemence of Mrs. Browning to a temper less assailable. The "feminine" quality of the early verse included the tremor of a sensibility too unquiet, a flurry not indeed of essential weakness but of unfulfilment. Not always are the "wild thoughts" shepherded. Repressed, but never en-

tirely stilled is the straining of which Mrs. Meynell so often accuses woman, eagerness for the point of rest among the chances of our mortal life. The imperfection of woman's spirit, as we have seen, she has defined and renounced for prose. She renounces it better for poetry—in her war poem, "A Father of Women," wherein she calls on the powers that attend on mortal thought, not indeed to unsex her but to grant her re-enforcement for endurance. With self-knowledge she rejects the pang of sympathy, praying for a transfusion of the father's blood, strength for compassion, quiet for the rash will, and the tenderness which can "pause and prevail." The complete woman, she would say, who would sustain both the sharpness of life and the "pierced" heart of the poet, must remember herself daughter of man.

Mrs. Meynell's typical verse, therefore, never lets itself go in a discharge of feeling. Its maturity, to be sure, does not belie its poignant youth. But it husbands its best; it holds its reserve. The author respected perhaps not only private distrust of impulse; she was upon her mettle before the conventional complaint that the poetry of woman is likely to suggest a "vocalisation of sentiment." The quotation is from a *National Observer* article of 1890 entitled "Poetry in Petticoats" in which the profane reviewer with at least the vocabulary of Henley hints that feminine lyricism tends "to have a taste, to something smack of pure bleat." Against one woman, at least, that charge can never be made.

By their freedom from the personal absorption the poems are characteristic of middle years reached in generosity and intelligence. They are, at their best, fine points of contemplation—not of the local self but of the human spirit in its immemorial moments. Here, despite the poet's subtleties, are chosen the elementary experiences of all souls,—the miracle of birth, of grief, that common kinship of nature, and "the incalculable tryst" of death. Such is the noble dignity of "The Launch," quick with universal wistfulness, quiet with the universal patience, which has submitted past bitterness to the universal mystery:

Forth to the alien gravity,
Forth to the laws of ocean, we
    Builders on earth by laws of land
    Entrust this creature of our hand
Upon the calculated sea.

Fast bound to shore we cling, we creep,
And make our ship ready to leap
    Light to the flood, equipped to ride
    The strange conditions of the tide—
New weight, now force, new world: the Deep.

Ah thus—not thus—the Dying, kissed,
Cherished, exhorted, shriven, dismissed,
    By all the eager means we hold
    We, warm, prepare him for the cold,
To keep the incalculable tryst.

This reflective quality is an unpretentious but distinct thing. It claims no esoteric illumination. It is

not, like the temper of a Wordsworth, receptive passiveness, waiting in the hope that a beauty born of sight and sound may pass within. Still less is it, as Sir Thomas Browne described the contemplation of the Trinity, "a solitary recreation." Mrs. Meynell would claim for herself only what she claimed of late for another poet: "Meditation never causes a relaxation of passion or of verse. She does not argue, but she convinces us that she thinks, that there is reason, not necessarily reasoning in her thought, and that the essence of her poems had its origin in the mind." By such standard she challenged judgment. Her thought might vary in momentum; it might drop a plumb-line to the depth of life or cast aspersion on free verse. But it must have an intellectual energy sufficient for the poetic act.

The thought, as in prose, is most frequently a paradox. Mrs. Meynell distinguished always in her own categories between the thought for prose and the thought poetic, "accepted of song." But if one studies the themes which appeared first in prose and were later by a shining afterthought transformed, he concludes that the telling paradox appeared to her increasingly apt for poetry. It was the only play of fancy which she allowed herself, the fancy engendered not in the eyes, but in the head, and therefore valid for herself.

It may be but a quip at "The Newer Vainglory," the arrogance of the modern Pharisee, reversed to a

tolerance more offensive than his ancient rigor. It may attempt more boldly the baffling mystery love—the eternal cleavage in union, or the ascetic worth of its denials. More and more with her advance into experience Mrs. Meynell's poetry has uncovered the unsearchable paradoxes of maternity, one day giver of soul less to child than to mother; again the giver not of life but of grief, till the very sacrifices of natural tenderness appear gifts of tragic destiny upon which God has forever multipled sorrow. Motherhood, then, to Mrs. Meynell life's best endowment, becomes from this sad side of truth a responsibility pitiful beyond our thought, till the very caresses of childhood are received with gratitude as "unhoped, unsought," and the gift of birth is but the gift of death, since

> She who slays,
> Is she who bears, who bears.

But whether the paradox be light as a touch or heavy with life, it is of its little poem the creating force.

Here then is the lyricism of what she has called "the short poetic thought." "There are long thoughts and short thoughts which are fit for poetry, reconciled from the beginning with the poetic intellect and justified by themselves. It is the brief thought that is essentially lyrical."

Her own is not always easy. Its subtlety of paradox, refined and spiritually ingenious, taxes our keenness. The very essence of her verses creates a

difficulty for the slack reader, whom she holds it no part of her business to spare. She is in good company. To read Donne or Browning or Meredith we must think. One pays her poetry at least the compliment of large comparisons.

This is not to forget its limitations. It varies in intensity, in significance, in energy of wing. Its form, at best of noble brevity, has not always the steadiness of its inward mood. A hurry quite alien to her interior peace is suggested by a fault which rather grew upon Mrs. Meynell, an over-iteration or listing of epithet. There are for verse as for prose lapses in self-criticism. There is at times a seriousness that seems unaware or careless whether the thought be noble or trivial. The slenderness of the yield, besides, is a sign not alone of severity but of restricted abundance. Mrs. Meynell would perhaps not dispute the dictum of Coventry Patmore, that a large harvest is one proof of the major genius. But this the infrequent flower of her mind, dim-hued, clearly shaped, is a plant and flower of light. It is no parasite growing in the shade.

Her technique is a simple but excellent artistry. To the classic disciplines she had never to submit, since she never desired enlargement. But she obeys in freedom. She preserves the diction dedicate to verse, but without undue ceremony. Her verse goes lightly in its vestal garb. Her rhythms are able servants, but never slaves to their form, claiming their free "inflection" by uncommon placings of the

pause. They use their English privilege, "the rooted liberty of flowers in breeze." In early years at least Mrs. Meynell liked the close "organism" of the sonnet, all the more since the sonnet true to type cannot live without its possessing thought however slight: "When a poetic short thought is transfigured in a single beautiful image, then the sonnet is satisfied, the sonnet is fulfilled."[1] An adequate description for "The Garden," "Thoughts in Separation," "A Shattered Lute!" But her stanzas are usually of her own making, so supple as to be entirely inconspicuous, expanding or folding a cadence at an exquisite lead.[2]

But the rhythms are a minor pleasure of Mrs. Meynell's poetry, exquisitely right as they are. She ceased with time to accept the lyric melody which sweeps her eager young verse. Her later poetry seldom clings in the memory of its lovers. For verse, little as for prose, did she like the easy slip of the easy music. One knows her horror of anapests, her slaying even in memory of her one anapestic poem. Her poetic rhythm has, at its best, the aim and energy and friction of the wing, the "act of flight":

> O be it heard
> Through weight of life—the skylark's gravity—
> That I am not a feather, but a bird.

A separate interest attaches to the *Last Poems,*

[1] "Sydney Dobell" . *The Second Person Singular.* P. 90.
[2] Miss Katharine Lee Bates has called my attention to her variations in the use of the five-line stanza.

all recently written. They foretell an approaching age which comes in mellowness, but with spirit still alert. The poetic gift speaks more at rest, or more frequently at play, in spirited recreation over a fine point of wit, a "simple subtlety," in grave but zestful sport of pranking paradox, in light poise upon the point of a small thought. One welcomes some reflections met already in her prose, now sprung to poetry. She was wont to delight in autumn at the childish song of "boy-birds." "The freshest and youngest note is, by a happy paradox, that of an autumnal voice," and we have "An October Red Breast":

> For duty sang those mates of May—
> This singing bird's a lad, a lad!

She was wont to feel a child's wonder for the flow of rivers always new in the habitual bed, "ever-fresh waters drawing to the ancient fall"; and the words have permanent shape in "Rivers Unknown to Song." Here are printed bits of her lovely verse poetics; and here is "The Question," the best phrasing of her fundamental persuasion that thought is the essential stuff of poetry. It is on her early text, the word of Virgil to Dante, remembered consistently after forty years: *"Il poeta mi disse, 'Che pensi'?"* But in 1923 she makes her own confession:

> Man at his little prayer tells Heaven his thought,
> To man entrusts his thought—"Friend, this is mine."
> The immortal poets within my heart have sought,
> Saying, "What is thine?"

The poems are slighter, less essential in content, but at ease, with a sight which has turned in patience from the shadow.

For the right valuation of Mrs. Meynell's work in comparison with that of her contemporaries it is still too early, if indeed for arbitrary judgment or for commensurations of poetry there are ever accepted times. But hers is an art which has fulfilled itself, which did according to its strength exactly what it meant to do.

And in nothing more than in its guarded integrity! Whatever befalls her repute, Mrs. Meynell will never be "forgotten with a batch."

## CHAPTER XVI

### Mrs. Meynell Among the Religious Poets

We turn inevitably at the last to Mrs. Meynell's religious verses in which her art finds its right fulfilment. Her delicate control holds here its surest possession. These are, with some exceptions, her best in form, of that gnomic brevity which is her sign of excellence both for prose and poetry. Their thought is, with few lapses, essentially poetic, "reconciled from the beginning with the poetic intellect." Each "closes, is finished in shape," as she has said of another's best. In the devotional theme, furthermore, she found most completely her point of "stable equilibrium" assured and held.

And nowhere else, one may venture to say, does she reach so unquestionable a "solitude" of spirit. One likeness sometimes suggests itself—to the other poet of small poems, whose poems too are "acts of flight"—Father Tabb. Of Father Tabb she has written with intimate comprehension. But the two poets live and move in different elements. The lyrics of Father Tabb seem at first reading unsubstantial, fairy things; on second, they prove to be authentic notes dropped by the young-eyed cherubin. Mrs. Meynell's poetry of the spirit on the contrary

has humbled itself altogether to the destiny and weight of the flesh. And no other comparison teases. Mrs. Meynell's religious lyric is a little thing "set apart," as the consecrating phrase goes, literally incomparable with another's work.

The poems reveal, and here is her deepest fulfilment, her most conscious and careful truth. The privilege of Mrs. Meynell's personal presence was not needed to teach the spiritual cause of her spiritual word. Those were no idle compliments of Francis Thompson, "To a Poet Breaking Silence." At her death the essayists chose the essential quotation. She does in verity:

> Teach how the crucifix should be
> Carven from the laurel tree.

Her chance words in prose upon religion carry conviction by the difficulty of the experience which they witness. They reveal an austerity of standard which knows no pleasant substitute for the stringencies of reality. In "Rejection" she turns in unconscious self-revelation from economies of style to the denials of the religious quest: "O weary, weary act of refusal! O waste but necessary hours, vigil and wakefulness of fear!"

We have seen elsewhere her guard over the act of prayer. It must be, she has told us, a perpetual beginning, never, though here the saints are not altogether on her side, risked by the usages of repetition. The perils of habit, many and subtle, those enemies

of spiritual perfection, make the theme of perhaps her finest parenthesis in spiritual didactics.

One recovers too with relish her attack of 1880 on Arnold's "Essay on Poetry," the introduction to Ward's *English Poets,* in which Arnold looks forward with what seems to the critic intellectual shuffling, to a future in which, after other values of religion shall have apparently become negligible, we shall turn to its "unconscious poetry," "to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us." "Has it indeed come to this," writes the young critic, "that interpretation, sustentation, and comfort are all the necessities of the human heart—interpretation because we are puzzled, sustentation because we are ill-tempered, and self-indulgent consolation because we are feeble pessimists? Not guidance, not discipline, not a rule of conduct, not laws, not punishment, not pardon? No commands in the face of good, no prohibition in the face of evil?"

We remember too with more immediate enjoyment a capital essay of 1910, introduction to Adeline Cashmore's *Mount of Vision,* in which Mrs. Meynell attacks the near-mysticism which has come into fashion, which indeed would suggest through the easiness of popular manuals that union with the Divine might be achieved on a summer's holiday. Mrs. Meynell has on her side the excellent irony and authority of Miss Evelyn Underhill, who has derided the illuminatory fad in a racy skit not commonly remembered, "How to be a Mystic."

Mrs. Meynell abhors with searching wit the use of "the Mystic Way" as a literary motif turning to prettiness the extreme secrets of that faith "for which the saints thought fifty years of self-conquest and self-abandonment a paltry price." Among the confident personæ of a "mystic novel," "no one seemed to have entered into the indispensable beginnings, to have overcome anything within, to have shut his mouth upon a hasty word, to have dismissed a worldly thought, to have compelled his heart to a difficult act of pardon. . . . The saints, on the other hand, gave themselves to that spade-work before permitting themselves so much as a credible dream." The fellowship of the poet's mind was with "those great experimentalists the saints, who underwent the life of self-conquest, strongly attaining at last to that unitive life which seems at last almost to become the slang of the studios, while they grew perfect in difficulty and earned their visions through dereliction and spoliation of heart."

The passion of religion was within her ken. No less goes to the cogency of "Easter Night." It escapes into a line of "Christ in the Universe":

> The terrible, shamefast, frightened, whispered, sweet
> Heart-shattering secret of His way with us.

It listens to the Pater Noster in the last of *Later Poems,* "shuddering through the paradox of pray-

er." The poems have interior heat, inward as the heart-beat.

But the poet's temper draws still rather by its reserves. Mrs. Meynell's reticence in religious matters might well give lessons in reverence. A large proportion of her whole utterance in prose upon religion has been already quoted. It has been taken only from parentheses, and has been printed in the compass of a single page. Her poems are dignified above all in their silences. They resemble the Apennines of her "First Snow," after the prolonged beat of the tempest has left its cover on the mountain tops:

> Within that fastness darkened from the sun,
> What solitary things were done?
> The clouds let go, they rose, they winged away.
> Snow-white the altered mountains faced the day,
> As saints who keep their counsel sealed and fast,
> Their anguish overpast.

The religious poems then are the strongest exercise of her characteristic control, her "rejection" of emotional indulgence. Such renouncement almost denies the very nature of the religious lyric as it is commonly conceived, whose very breath of life is a breath of feeling whispered or clamourous as the spirit urges. But Mrs. Meynell is nowhere more consistently resolute than here. A quotation from her memorial to her father has always been applied to herself: "The things he abstained from were

all exquisite." Various and exquisite are the emotions from which Mrs. Meynell abstains—the exultations and the agonies which have moulded the superb confessions of the religious lyric in English.

It has known the distress of the contrite heart. It sounds in penetential prayer, a strong undertone to the noble medieval chant. It sounds with Elizabethan resonance throughout the large acres of Elizabethan verse piety—sometimes with the bareness of truth from the "darksome, lowly place far in" of Spenser's "House of Holiness," more often a thought debonairly as the manner was:

> Great and good God, can I not think of Thee,
> But it must straight my melancholy be?

It remains constant to English verse in moods of "darting conscience," or "sad eclipse"—a universal theme not yet antiquated for letters—the sense of what can still for convenience be called sin—"its desolate passions, its aching hours."[1]

There is the lyric of desire, as it watches unsleeping in the moonlit passion of Christina Rossetti's "Advent,"—waiting, before the morning watch, the coming of a Hope always deferred.

There is the lyrical act of faith, like Patmore's "Magna est Veritas," which chants its witness to the unseen good in summons or in challenge:

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[1] Lionel Johnson. From The Precept of Silence. In *Poetical Works.* (London, Mathews, 1915.) P. 23.

When all its work is done, the lie shall rot.
The truth is great and shall prevail
When none cares whether it prevail or not.

There is the lyric of thankfulness for boons diverse—whether the comfortable list of Herrick, the "little" bin and beet and the extraordinary "teeming hen"; Traherne's less materialistic contemplation of fountain-joys; or gleaming always through the broken splendours of Vaughan, in thanks for divinity in the sap that "bloods," in the spring that leaps, in all lights celestial, and in the bright shoots of angel infancy.

There is the lyric of praise, less felicitous perhaps —since praise is to a degree appraisal, foredoomed to fail since it attempts the unspeakable and the unsaid. A contemporary Quarles might suggest that it is like a hose too short for a high reach. "Pious ejaculations," therefore, so dear to the seventeenth century and to all hymnology, though often noble in poetry, noble in faith, remain, when all is said, in the mouth of a Jeremy Taylor or even of a Crashaw, to some degree ejaculatory.

Always safer is the lyric of love, the turning within of the soul in tenderness, true for poetry from the "Swete Jesu" of Richard Rolle, to the "Sweet tempter Christ" of Laurence Housman.

There is the message of God's love for the soul. It pleads the mysterious romance of emotional Christianity—the coming of the spiritual lover who seeks and woos, while the heart avoids, denies, re-

fuses, and "flees to God" only when it cannot flee away. It has made for English "divine" poetry indeed. But nowhere is the sweetness of the wooing lovelier said than in its earlier guise:

> I am truelove that fals was neuer,
> My sistur, mannys soule, I loued hyr thus;
> By-cause I wold on no wyse disseuere,
> I left my kyngdome gloriouse.

Here is perhaps the supreme emotion of the English religious lyric.

In the lyric of resolution at least the noble Puritan temper found its voice:

> "My soul, go boldly forth,"

said Richard Baxter.

> "They also serve who only stand and wait,"

said Milton.

And the themes for the will are exhausted.

But the poetry of Mrs. Meynell preserves most securely on the religious theme its contemplative poise. It lays bare the human stress no more in the strain of will than in the surge of emotion. The normal religious poet takes us incredibly into his confidence; he reveals in all simplicity and candour his experiences of ardour and of anguish. All these Mrs. Meynell respects in silence as modesties of nature.

To be glad of her reticence is not to be ungrateful

for the stark confidences of Christina Rossetti or the fine valours of Louise Imogen Guiney. The ways of abundance are of more immediate appeal. Nobody has taught better than Mrs. Meynell herself that we should accept with reverence and not with criticism the superb gift of a headlong spirit in the generosity of self-abandon. Squeamishness besides is not in the conscience of saints. But our mood of certain hours accepts with relief the darkening of the personal sanctuary.

Close doors and windows that none may see—

is the bidding of one modern mystic lyric of perfect intimacy and perfect reserve.[1]

All the more for its characteristic calm of meditation, the poetry of Mrs. Meynell becomes at its finest the poetry in whose names critical crimes are most easily committed, the poetry of mysticism. Mysticism—held always in some way to be the search of the soul for union with Divinity and belief in the reality of the experience—represents the ultimate daring of the religious consciousness. It is a fearful place, therefore, for the literary critic as for the author of a "mystic novel" to rush in. Common parlance ignorantly holds the word synonymous with emotional religion, and dubs as "mystic" the lyric of most ardent palpitations. And an authentic rapture, however interpreted, seems to be an acknowledged stage of the mystic consciousness.

[1] Evelyn Underhill, "Introversion," *Immanence* (London, Dent, 1913).

A truer psychology, however, recognises as well in the experience, the supreme act of a unique concentration. And this phase of the mystic consciousness must be silent. In absoluteness, one would suppose, it must be altogether silent, becoming articulate only in incompleteness. The human speech is broken when "the deadly flesh begins to behold spiritual things." Greatest mystics, we know, have often been content to say nothing. Or if they speak that they do know or bear witness to that they have seen, they struggle somewhat vainly, like true children of heaven's kingdom, for the unknown words of eternal life. There is singular value, then, in a poetry which abjures, not in ignorance, direct expression of mysteries, and presents them from without in a reverent and unhasting contemplation.

"The company of right mystics," Mrs. Meynell wrote in 1904, "grows smaller in these latter days, but the company of respectful watchers of the mystery grows larger." The part of watcher, as we have always been remembering, was Mrs. Meynell's choice for life. Patmore she calls the watcher "of the skies." But her own vision waited less upon the skies than upon the human spirit—and the human spirit in other selves than her own.

There is no lack of intimacy. "It often happens," she has written, "that the personal poet has little and the impersonal poet has much of the peculiar quality of intimacy and nearness." So we judge of herself. Her poetry has the intimacy always pos-

sessed by utterance from depths, if the analogy may hold that the nearer to the centre of the sphere, the closer are the radii.

On the religious theme, above all, her note is strangely impersonal, detached from wistfulness or adoration. She speaks the word not of herself but of Everyman, of the universal "child of process" on pilgrimage. The figure of pilgrimage has always come soon to the questing soul. But seldom has it been expressed with rectitude of a more disciplined patience:

> Thou art the Way
> Hadst Thou been nothing but the goal,
> I cannot say
> If Thou hadst ever met my soul.

Seldom has the withholding of vision been met with quieter acceptance:

> "You never attained to Him?" "If to attain
> Be to abide, that may be."
> "Endless the way, followed with how much pain!"
> "The Way was He!"

In its very control of spiritual greed we read the proved sign of the mystic obedience.

In bolder watch this poetry sends the soul to divine immortal experience from mortal depths.

This is no mysticism of nature's splendours. From another world sounds the witness of a Wordsworth to the presence of a Mighty Being whose

dwelling is in the mind of man, to be sure, but more immediately in the round ocean and in the light of setting suns. The poet foregoes in this renouncement a distinguished poetic fellowship who have felt vaguely but in conviction a divine reality in visible beauty. A. E.'s "Answer" speaks for them:

> Out of the vast the voice of one replies,
> Whose words are clouds and stars and night and day,
> When for the light the anguished spirit cries,
> Deep in its house of clay.

Mrs. Meynell revered, to be sure, the spiritual capacities of the sense. "The Body" is perhaps her deepest testimony. The body, centre of consciousness poetic or common, "sued by earth's embassies," is sought by a more august approach. Here is made the very "appeal of God," since the divine seeker of the soul speaks in no occult proclamation, but waits before the judgment seat of this our flesh, "where the high senses hold their spiritual state."

The divinity of nature remains, nevertheless, to Mrs. Meynell's reading, blind, bidding the children of men back to dust, and claiming for chaos all pride of man's achievement. It is creator of anguish, maker not only of "the clean heart transpierced," that bearable sight, but of the more sombre mystery, that of "the merited scourge."

Mrs. Meynell's mysticism then becomes explicitly Christian in its apprehension of a God potential and revealed within the human capacity. She has

understood divinity in the sudden pressure of human pity. She has seen God in the human urgency for sacrifice, that "divine prerogative" refused in its completeness to the human desire. She has beheld God in the human gift for grief.

The crucifixion of Christ, to her the extreme act of human suffering, is interpreted by a fresh and daring symbolism. The cry of the forsaken Christ is not the solitary lament of a mortal despair; it is the birth-cry of immortal understanding, the first recoil of dying man entering the knowledge of divinity, seeing for the first time and for a moment hesitating to accept "God's infinite capacity for woe."

Orthodox in her acceptance of dogma, she has still been poet in her interpretation of its significance, philosopher too in her recognition of the infinities withheld from human ken. "Christ in the Universe," a poem of literal Christianity, reverent for the visitation in flesh of an entrusted Word, is aware of mysteries beyond the knowledge of our "wayside planet," of revelations doubtless given otherwhere of "a million alien gospels" all essential to knowledge, understandable perhaps by us in some eternity,

> When in our turn we show to them a man.

But the central message of this poetry is a local Evangel, of a Word made flesh—or rather dis-

covered in the flesh. As doctrine has it—God is sent by God to the mortal frame; by a frequent modern revision God is discovered by man in man. And in the poetry of Mrs. Meynell there is, toward the separated human spirit, even in its lack and in its blindness, a homely worship. Her little poem, "Veneration of Images," is suitably of a wayside cross, whereon hangs a "man, first comer," whose arms outstretched, "entreat, gather, clasp, welcome, bind":

> Uplifted for a blessing on yon sea,
> Unshrined on this highway,
> O flesh, O grief, thou too shalt have our knee,
> Thou rood of every day!

The doctrine of the Incarnation, that core of dogmatic Christianity, makes most natural poetry to the Catholic. If he is no theologian, he has had one piece of luck: he has been spared an inheritance of controversy; he has escaped the exercises of a benighted Calvinism which by the practices of ignorance has left the dogmas to a posterity Protestant or agnostic—materialized, spoiled at once of their metaphysics and their credibility by the sane mind. He has grown up, besides, in the habit of the Mass, schooled to believe the immediate transcendence of the material element. It has for him more of marvel than of doctrine,

> That in the forme of bred and wyn,
> The preste vns scheweth vch a dave.

Always familiar but always remote, the thought of an Incarnation is thus prepared for poetry. For the poet it is his natural inheritance from the religious lyric of the Middle Ages, which returns from its many songs to sing in duty of its best, whether in perfunctory recitative or in amorous raptures, of a Godhead:

> Which lihted doun in a mayden pure,
> Mary bi name,
> Who bore Him to mannys frame.

The question we have always with us: What is the unique quality of Catholic poetry? Is there in any true sense a Catholic poetry at all? (One uses the word Catholic, of course, in discussion of Mrs. Meynell, in the sense of Roman Catholic.) The Catholic critics cannot resent our curiosity. It is started by the excellence of religious poetry written by Catholics, by the amazing number of good Catholic poets who have found religion a suitable theme. One is inclined at first to answer yes to the question. One would guess that, with the notable exceptions, including to be sure no less than Coventry Patmore, Catholic poetry, when it is good, is usually to be told blindfold by the voice. But our smartest distinctions somehow crumble to vanity.

We have detected in Catholic verse a quaintness of figure, a direct homeliness of comparison, which might seem to the Protestant an irreverent familiarity. There is the Christ child of Father Tabb,

who came down from heaven to find his lost ball, the earth. Quaint fancies in Catholic imagery crowd plentifully to mind. And then one remembers the interminable "Pious Fancies" of the irrepressible Quarles. And from nearer days are the delightful notions of T. E. Brown.

Catholic imagery seems sometimes daring to the edge of violence, especially in meditations upon the Passion:

> Terrible fruit was on the tree
> In the acre of Gethsemane.[1]

It risks often the physical pressure, batters the spirit to a liveliness of sense. It is most frequent in the sacramental poetry: as in the sonnet of Constable "To the Blessed Sacrament," where the entrance of the Host to the body is compared to the harrowing of Hell,—in such poems as "Barnfloor and Winepress" of Gerard Hopkins, where the Mass is conceived as all "Sacrifice," the poem one shudder of rapture unsparing for divine agony in divine completeness. Here is a stress of passion more commonly "accepted" of Catholic song (to steal Mrs. Meynell's quotation). And then one remembers John Donne, whose "mistress fair religion" (a rather dubious character—if one may imitate Mrs. Meynell again, and differ from tradition in a paren-

[1] Gerard Hopkins. "Barnfloor and Winepress." Quoted from *Lyra Sacra*. (London, Methuen, 1895.) P. 313.

thesis) was surely Anglican for all her Catholic recollections.

The temper of Catholic poetry seems for the most part more frankly ardent and immediate. It may take the questionable risk of excitement, as in the extraordinary juvenilia of Digby Mackworth-Dolben. It may offer the shelter of personal tenderness as in Katharine Tynan's "After Communion." It leaps unbounded in the ecstacies of Crashaw.

> All else for use, one only for desire;
> Thanksgiving for the good, but thirst for Thee,

says Miss Guiney. And thus far Catholic poetry has chosen the better part, has made less often the injudicious attempt to praise God, and attempted only to love Him. We decide that there is a unique poetic warmth from the frankly personal character of Catholic worship. And then we remember the unparallelled end of "The Everlasting Mercy."

One remembers first and last for English religious poetry George Herbert, "the wit and worshipper," for whom among his contemporaries Mrs. Meynell, though she has said little of him, has felt perhaps most homage. Herbert's humble verse has made the best proof of its vitality by its mere survival after two centuries of reprints in *Daily Helps for Daily Needs*. Even such burial has not killed it. Despite lapses to commonplace, childishness, uncer-

tainties of taste, limitation of vision, his works have followed him to a singular degree for the influence of a poetical minor. He lives again, not alone in his avowed disciples, Vaughan and Crashaw, one at least greater than himself. He lives in the spirit and form of religious poetry, in poets of diverse temper, unaware often of their lineage. The typical devotional poem of today, Protestant but more especially Catholic, inherits much in form and temper from George Herbert. It is ardent meditation in its elaborate and moulding parable.

One ventures in the end therefore upon no absolute distinctions for Catholic poetry. But all communions whose worship is richly sacramental and therefore essentially symbolic have seemed to have the better chance for poetry. The meagreness of the Puritan harvest is a commonplace of criticism. For religion we may, according to personal bent, regard the symbol as divinity or as defilement; for religious poetry it is a blessing at the start. It creates for the Protean truth a guize new-made in which it appears as if seen for the first time, delivered from the spell of habit. It makes too for the mystery of its message a bearable approach. Of things unsearchable, poetry, like Jesus of Nazareth, speaks usually in parables lest hearing we should understand. And this enigma of the Scripture is the wisdom of religious poetry. No man has seen God at any time. At least, he may not tell about the sight directly. But the symbol serves best

as a covering behind which without offence we may see a light through the veil that seems to hide it. For poetry then the poem of intimate parable has left a special legacy: it has told of holy desire, of praise, of penitence, of spiritual love, in language where we can read in decency all that we have commonly any business to read of Mansoul. Mrs. Meynell, we must remember, has pointed out the greater poetry behind imagery. But it is the infrequent power of the infrequent gift.

The sacramental churches offer poetry, we may venture to say, a superior means in the supreme symbol of the Eucharist, taken in its broadest sense as the gift of heavenly bread. The Christian centuries have done their best upon it; it has preserved for the Christian world the incremental religious expression of all the Christian ages. For it is a symbol universal and immemorial, of a significance more ancient than inheres in its Christian import, type of primordial hunger for the bread of heaven and the relief that somehow awaits entire faith. This is not a feast of separate communion. Not alone Roman or Anglican or Greek, not alone Christian, not alone Persian or Phrygian, not local to any cult or mystery, is the ancient impulse of the God-seeking soul to dramatize itself in a unique sacrament, to express itself in a special metaphor: "What shall I render unto God for all that He has rendered unto me? I will accept the cup of salvation." The power of the symbol varies in suggestion and

pressure. None has perhaps done more spiritually even here than George Herbert, who in the simple parable of "Love" has hinted the unspeakable mysteries of the Eucharistic worship. To Catholic poets it is the symbol which comes most easily, from the staid and gentle childishness of Southwell to the hieratic chantings of Thompson.

The Catholicism of Mrs. Meynell's verse, loyal to its pasture, is notably Catholicism for Everyman. Our sympathy is ready, without special interpretation or habit. Not even on the religious theme is hers poetry of a group. Her verses may be claimed by whoso feels the emotions of Christian worship right for poetry. Mrs. Meynell, a stout disciple of her Church, lived no more than Coventry Patmore in an intellectual "province." It is the best compliment to say that her Catholicism might be spelled without the capital letter.

Nowhere is she more liberally Christian than where she is most literally Catholic—in her poetry of the Mass. In the worship of the Mass her creed found fulfilment for the personal self, fixed in an isolation which is its dignity and treasure, but wistful to merge its desire within another life—restless, consciously or not, for the loss of self in the divine rest. Man may not find union with man; the mystery of the secret soul must abide. But the incalculable mystery, union with God, is by her creed an act more easily compassed. And for common man,

"intent, devout," there is by the message of the Catholic poet a union with God forever offered, forever received, in the rite of the Church. So in "A General Confession," with an emphasis peculiar to herself, Mrs. Meynell answers in simplicity the protest of man's isolation. "Struck apart" are the worshippers, prisoned soul from soul, but each offered in the gift of the Eucharist union with Very God, each receiving in his lonely self the ministration of ineffable powers. Her conception of the Eucharist is simple and universal. To Mrs. Meynell's imagination the figure of the Mass is ever present not in image but in fact. In nature's fruitfulness indeed she sees made ready and offered, the sacrament of the divine feast. To her the God driven by human ordinance from human altars, is present wherever grows and comes to harvest the wheat and grape, already in mystery the bread and wine, "the lonely, unconsecrated Host," awaiting the privilege of sacrifice. Here is no violence of interpretation. "The kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence," Mrs. Meynell has said wittily of Mrs. Browning, and approved the assault. But for herself the supreme benignities are quiet.

In "The Unknown God" we have Mrs. Meynell's poetry of the Mass at its highest. Here at least she ceases to let down her "melancholy lead" into the depths of sorrow and gives instead good tidings. In the life of a stranger at Communion, fed at the

altar, the present Deity is recognized incarnate, realized, worshipped in the mind and faltering will —human but the God confessed:

> Christ in this man's life—
> This stranger who is thine—in all his strife
> All his felicity, his good and ill,
> In the assaulted stronghold of his will,
>
> I do confess Thee here—
>
> * * * * *
>
> Christ in his numbered breath,
> Christ in his beating heart and in his death,
> Christ in his mystery! From that secret place
> And from that separate dwelling, give me grace!

Here is her poise of contemplation, her characteristic watchfulness for the simplicities of the spirit, which lie too close for the common perspective, her escape from the weight of the personal burden, her contact none the less with interior fires.

Mrs. Meynell reaches most surely her fulfilment in religious verse, since the paradox, the natural shape of her thought, is the most daring expression of the mystic consciousness. It has been articulate in symbols—the flame, the light, the voice, the pilgrimage—witness perhaps in their perpetual return to the oneness of their truth. But by and beyond the combination of symbols, there remains for religious expression the paradox, a more gallant

utterance since it seeks, unlike the symbol, not alone to suggest but directly to affirm; honest in defeat, since it confesses failure by its essential contradiction.

The Christian consciousness has repeatedly chosen the paradox to express its inexpressible. Man has known himself to be "in the assaulted stronghold of his will" a battle of warring principles called ineffectually the flesh and spirit, the "Psychomachia" enduring through the ages, where he takes at once both sides, choosing apparently at the same time good and evil. Old and familiar is his protest at the paradox of his slavery: "What I hate, that I do." He has known the contradiction between the material appearance and the spiritual fact, the potency of the small thing against the great, heaven's kingdom shut within the mustard seed, the speciousness of the unsanctified deed, the sound of brass under the loveless eloquence of men and angels. Recurrently the saint has striven to name the miracle of deliverance from self: the enfranchisement-in-bondage, the death-in-life, the joy-in-grief, the loss-in-gain, the strength made perfect in weakness, the revelation of wisdom unto babes when the things of naught are chosen to confound the things that are. He has known "the paradox of prayer," the desire for the unpalatable good which the soul at the very moment of petition abhors. And claimant for human beatitude has

found, to declare the oneness of experience, no better language than a sheaf of contradictions:

> I am the doubter and the doubt,
> And I the hymn the Brahmin sings,

says Emerson for Brahma. And, answering the Greek hymn from behind the centuries,

> I am the Door to thee who knockest at Me,
> I am the Way to thee a wayfarer,[1]

Mrs. Meynell confesses for the modern mystic a bolder affirmation:

> Access, approach art
> Art Thou—Time, Way, and Wayfarer,

The paradox held a special relish for the English seventeenth century, to which Mrs. Meynell has so often seemed curiously akin. An age profoundly religious for all its whims, it chose the paradox with deliberation and reverence. An age which waited upon the singular and clever with idolatry, loving the paradox as the quintessence of wit, it held the religious paradox an offering acceptable unto God, the best act of "holy facetiousness."

So the "Christian paradoxes" held their headlong course—to borrow the title of a quaint and delight-

[1] Quoted by Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*. P. 160. From Dr. M. R. James, "Hymns of Jesus," in *Apochryphia Anecdota* (Cambridge, 1897).

ful list. They sparkle everywhere, of diverse excellence and indiscriminate taste. Here, if nowhere else, Anglican, Puritan, and Catholic could agree. John Donne, preparing a sacrifice of his soul, must needs have "fire, sacrifice, priest, altar," be the same. Sir Thomas Browne, rejoicing in his paradise of enigmas, found "not impossibilities enough in religion for an active faith," and contemplated with satisfaction an undetermined immortality, "happy to be nothing in the bliss of being ever." On his side Richard Baxter was not behindhand, who could launch a tiny volume into eternity, humbly offered in the preface as "fit only for women and vulgar wits," loaded with the sub-title, "The Concord-Discord of a Broken-Healed Heart, Sorrowing - Rejoicing, Fearing - Hoping, Living - Dying." There are few pleasanter suggestions of poetical friendliness than the record of Cowley and Crashaw exchanging the paradoxes of hope,—

> The entity of those that are not yet.

The natural maker of seventeenth-century religious paradox is Crashaw, himself "undaunted" spirit of desire, turning ecstasy into epigram in lyric chant.

Crashaw left sanction enough for a core of paradox in Catholic poetry. Francis Thompson, indeed, rather than Crashaw, is its representative. The poetry of Crashaw, rising from the altar of an exquisite spirit, is a flame indeed, but a flame for its

own small altar. The Christian paradox of Thompson is of a richer and larger consciousness, potent with splendid imaginings, driven by the dynamic of a complex emotion. It speaks with authority in the divine riddles of "Assunta Maria." It echoes variously to the running of "The Hound of Heaven." It haunts with sad insistence the chant of "The Mistress of Vision." It strikes out once in "The Kingdom of God" a primary simplicity, the superb creed of the mystic assumption.

> "O world invisible, we view thee.
> O world intangible, we touch thee.
> O world unknowable, we know thee.
> Inapprehensible, we clutch thee."

The religious paradox of Mrs. Meynell is a smaller and more subtle thing. It carries none of the headlong gusto, the multitudinous melody; it is but the shaping force of a little lyric, still at the end with throbbing heart like a bird just alighted. It trails no cloud of splendour. It has the compression of the epigram, compact, reserved. Less emotional for all its intensity than the regal contradictions of Thompson, hers is a paradox of intellectual fibre, which gives strength to her intuitive flights.

Her religious poetry disputes with the challenge of unconditioned faith the cruelty of fact. To the horrors of fortuitous disaster wrought by the "immediate and unintelligible" act of some natural de-

stroying force, she opposes, as we have seen, the redemptive rush of human compassion, the "mediate and intelligible hand."

Her poetry follows in desire the ultimate paradox of sanctity. The extreme of asceticism is here, constraint to search out the depths of spiritual poverty lest some priceless treasure be missed. There is dread more than medieval of life untormented, distrust of ease, not alone as a peril but as a denial, desire to entertain fear and pain as angelic guests and to wrestle with them in the dark lest some necessary blessing be foregone.

In "Free Will," with a daring beyond orthodoxy she insists on the special privilege of sin committed:

> But my best treasures are,
> Ignoble, undelightful, abject, cold,
> Yet O, profounder hoards oracular
> No reliquaries hold.
>
> There lie my trespasses,
> Abjured but not disowned.

They are a possession abhorred, but cherished, as she implies in her lines "Beyond Knowledge," not alone as access to life or as first stage already of a rebirth in beauty, but meant by a literal reading of the promise for a splendour of their own in a "rescued world."

The mystery of an Incarnation, Mrs. Meynell's inevitable theme, is a supreme paradox—the para-

dox of a God-in-man, of a Word-made-flesh. And the Mass, various in the symbolism constant to Catholic worship, whether of divine sacrifice or of an available bread of Heaven, is further to the Catholic believer the perpetual enactment of the incalculable contradiction. In the sacramental reading of "The Unknown God," therefore, is indeed, if we may use the thought without irreverence, a transubstantiation of paradox, paradox become the literalness of simple truth. Here is one poem, "plain beyond oracles and past all symbols simple." It has passed beyond the courts of imagery.

The message of "The Unknown God" may be the authentic, is at least the present message of Mrs. Meynell's poetry. It utters a catholicity which all can understand.

Her popularity will always be limited by her chosen solitude of spirit and art, although she moved so "vigilantly" in her generation. We turn today with some wistfulness the exquisite pages of her verse, even of her prose unchallenged in distinction. Both seem sometimes strangely remote, like many another fine thing, relic of choice hours in an England that is changing.

"Shall not the Thing," Mrs. Meynell wrote in 1891, "as we compose ourselves to literature, assume more and more the honour, the hesitation, the reconciliation of the Word?"

Nothing appears at present less likely. A fastidious leisure seems just now the least probable asset

of our uncertain future. But as we advance into years of difficulty and unlovely turbulence, we shall find at least one dogma essential, however diverse the language of its mysteries—the dogma of a divinity in common man. For one paradox, immemorial and prophetic, is necessary to us, if the paradox of hope is to remain: *"Verbum caro factum est."*

# BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES UPON THE WORK OF MRS. MEYNELL

# Bibliographical Notes Upon the Work of Mrs. Meynell

(The following notes do not include the general sketches dispersed in journalism or, usually, such work of translation or editing as makes no personal contribution to literature.)

## I

### Books by Mrs. Meynell

(Listed in chronological order)

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*The Poor Sisters of Nazareth.* An illustrated record of life at Nazareth House, Hammersmith. Drawn by G. Lambert. Written by Alice Meynell. (London, Burns & Oates, 1889.)

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*The Children.* (London and New York, John Lane, 1896.)

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*The Shepherdess, and Other Verses.*[3] (London, Burns & Oates, 1914.)

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*Poems.*[6] (London, Burns & Oates, 1921.)

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*The Poems of Alice Meynell.*[7] (London, Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1923.)

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[1] Reprint of *Other Poems* with additions.
[2] Collection to date.
[3] Reprint of *Later Poems* with omissions.
[4] Collection chosen from *The Rhythm of Life, The Colour of Life, The Spirit of Place, Ceres' Runaway, The Children.*
[5] All previously printed.
[6] Collection to date.
[7] Complete edition.

## II

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Patmore, Coventry, K. D., *Poetry of Pathos and Delight.* (London, W. Heinemann, 1896.)

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plete Works. "Renaissance Edition." Vol. 7. (New York, Sproul, 1907.) *Ibid.*, Complete Works. "The Harper edition." Vol. 4. (New York, Harper, 1907.)
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[1] Actual publication uncertain.
[2] Anthology of verse for children.

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(Listed in chronological order)

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Johnson, Samuel, *Selections from.* With G. K. Chesterton. "Regent Library." (London, Herbert & Daniel, 1911.)

[1]Seventeenth-century religious poets.

## IV

## THE REPUBLISHED ESSAYS OF MRS. MEYNELL WITH DATES OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION.

(Listed by title of volumes in which they were first reprinted.)

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The Unit of the World, *Scots' Observer,* February 2, 1889.
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James Russell Lowell. This essay has not been found in earlier print.
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Fellow Travellers with a Bird*
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July,* *Pall Mall Gazette,* August 12, 1896.
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The Horizon,* *Pall Mall Gazette,* April 22, 1896.
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Shadows,* *Pall Mall Gazette,* May 27, 1896.

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These essays are all reprinted from the *Pall Mall Gazette,* 1896 and 1897.

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Some Thoughts of a Reader of Tennyson, *Dublin Review,* January-March, 1910.
Dickens as a Man of Letters,[2] *Atlantic Monthly,* January, 1903.
Swinburne's Lyrical Poetry,[3] *Dublin Review,* July-September, 1909.
Charlotte and Emily Brontë,[4] *Dublin Review,* July-September, 1911.

[1] All other essays in this volume have been previously listed.
[2] Similar material is printed in the *Pall Mall Gazette,* January 11 and 18, 1899.
[3] Similar material is printed in the *Pen,* May 22 and June 12, 1880.
[4] Similar material is printed in the *Pall Mall Gazette,* April 6, 1894; May 24 and 31 and June 7, 1899.

Charmian. This study is new in this form, but takes suggestion from several essays in the *Pall Mall Gazette.*
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A Modern Poetess, *Pall Mall Gazette,* September 23, 1896.
To Italy with Evelyn, *Pall Mall Gazette,* October 11, 1899.
Waterfalls, *Pall Mall Gazette,* April 13, 1898.
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## V

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(Listed under titles of the periodicals in which they occur)

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(To these should be added the introduction to the *Mount of Vision,* now out of print.)

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